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Her Life and Magic

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MARY BUTTS: HER LIFE AND MAGIC

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A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance for award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. School of History June 2019

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of the English author and diarist Mary Butts (1890-1937). The focus of the work is an exploration of the way in which her very personal and lifelong interest in magic, ritual, occult practices and knowledge, and her search for personal enlightenment, was incorporated into her fiction, both novels and short stories. Life and magic were deeply intertwined for Butts, and the title was chosen to reflect that. Magic and the occult were deeply connected to both her daily life and her writing and this dissertation, unlike previous work on Butts, will focus on the importance of magic and the construction of ritual in her work. She lived at a transitional time in the history of magic; between the so-called occult revival of the late nineteenth century, and the post-war development of modern paganism and witchcraft, and this therefore makes her writings on the subject so interesting and indeed, worthy of study.

The first part of the dissertation, the Introduction, is an overview of her work including critical responses, contemporary or later. It includes a survey of the current literature which has Mary Butts as its subject; this will indicate how the approach of previous biographers and editors has differed from my own.

The second chapter is an exploration of the way in which her magical philosophy developed and how she used both the literature available together with her surroundings, to construct a unique way of viewing the universe. This chapter draws extensively on her journals and includes an account of the time spent with Aleister Crowley, who at that time was the most well-known ritual magician in Europe.

The third chapter is a detailed analysis of her fiction, novels and short stories, which shows how magic and ritual were supremely important elements in her work and which made her unique.

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This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Frederick Powell (1917-2014) and Christine Powell (1925-2019)

Author's declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulation and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

Signed

Dated

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Mary Butts her life and magic.

Introduction

It is fair to say that Mary Butts (1890-1937), novelist, short story writer, poet, critic and enthusiastic student of the occult, is very far from being a literary household name. Her published works, which have always been difficult to classify, are positioned within the framework of modernism, the literary style that developed as a response to the horror of the Great War, and which reflected the mood of depression and nihilism that co-existed with that of the devil-may-care abandon to be found in society in the twenties and thirties (at least, to be found in the more privileged sections of society). The inter-war years were a transitional period both in the history of modern ritual magic and in literature: Mary Butts was, if not at the forefront of these developments, very much an interesting contributor.

To summarise, she was born in Dorset in a house called Salterns which, together with the surrounding landscape took on a mystical significance for her in later life when the house no longer belonged to her family. After a conventional boarding school education, Mary threw herself wholeheartedly into bohemian life in London and Paris. She developed a fascination with magic and the occult, studied with Aleister Crowley, the self-styled Beast himself, and regularly published works of fiction and essays, to be described later in this chapter. After a period of rather aimless drifting, unsatisfactory relationships and drug addiction, she finally returned to live in Cornwall, continuing to write and to find some solace in the Anglican Church of her childhood.

The reason for making her the subject of this thesis is that she is one of a small group of contemporary writers who left both works of fiction and a diary record. This enables us to trace her development as both author and occultist. She had a life style which, though far from privileged, enabled her to devote time to her explorations, and she also had the determination to reach out to people she considered knowledgeable enough to assist her in this quest. She is a representative of the spirit of enquiry and curiosity regarding the occult which

became a feature of this period in history, among a group which included writers, artists, musicians, and those who lived on the bohemian fringes of society.

She had a particular attraction to that form of French occultism which was centred on Paris, and derived from the writings of Eliphas Levi in the late 19th century, and those that came before him. And like many others who were drawn to the esoteric, she spent a great deal of time there, immersing herself in its strange and unique associations with magic and the occult. Her residence in, and exposure to, the culture of bohemian Paris in the years between the Wars was at a time of increased interest in (and openness toward) magic and ritual. This thesis will therefore focus on those works of hers which show most clearly the influence of these Parisian mysteries. Despite the time she spent with Aleister Crowley, a time that was well-documented, and the number and range of her published works, she remains an obscure figure, on the margins of both the history of magic and of English literature and as such deserves some time as the centre of attention.

Butts' interest in and indeed, preoccupation with, occult and supernatural themes, was present from her childhood; this included a profound interest in the development and functionality of ritual. That evolved into a clear statement of intent regarding the systematic study of magic and the occult. She herself wanted magical power both to achieve spiritual fulfilment and to become a better writer, and her diaries are full of references to her progress along this path.

Her close association with Aleister Crowley was unusual (though not unique) for a contemporary author.¹ This contact included an initiation, conducted in Paris by Crowley personally, and a stay at the Great Beast's Abbey of Thelema where she subjected herself to his rigorous regime in order to find enlightenment and power through magic. Her written accounts of this period in her diaries (which she had begun writing in 1916) and the impressions of him given in her fiction (albeit very much disguised) are important sources of information.

Butts' published work consists of novels, short stories, poems, autobiography and criticism. Her principal works consist of, the novel *Ashe of Rings* (1921) which deals with the mystical power of a specific place and the means, both practical and

¹ For example, Victor Neuberg (1883-1940) the poet and publisher had a close association with Crowley.

magical, by which the characters try to establish their control over it, two recurrent themes throughout her work, and two further novels, *Armed with Madness* (1928) a reworking of the grail legend, and its sequel *Death of Felicity Taverner* (1932). Her autobiography *The Crystal Cabinet*, was published posthumously in 1937. Essays entitled *Traps for Unbelievers* and *Warning to Hikers*, musings on religion and history were both published in 1932. Short stories were published at intervals throughout her life, but a definitive collected edition did not appear until 2014. The other most significant work is her diary, edited and published in 2002 by Natalie Blondel. This is, as one might expect, the work which is the truest reflection of her innermost thoughts, her emotional and intellectual triumphs and defeats, but it is her short stories which most clearly reflect the influence of French occultism.

Although criticism of Butts' works was published during her lifetime and shortly thereafter, the earliest significant publication devoted to Butts' life and work was edited by the literary scholar and film maker, Christopher Wagstaff. Drawn to her work by a chance discovery, he and his wife Barbara organised a conference "The writings and world of Mary Butts", held on February 23rd to 24th 1984 at the University of California, Davis. This led the following year, to the publication of a "*A Sacred Quest ; The life and writings of Mary Butts*",² which collected the papers from this conference together with contemporary criticism and memories of Butts, and examples of her work. Contributors to the conference and subsequent book were primarily poets rather than established literary critics and include Louis Adeane, Robin Blaser and Ronald Duncan as well as Mary Butts' contemporaries, (both friends and critics) Bryher³, Virgil Thompson, David Hope and Hugh Ross Williamson.

Further study of Butts was delayed as her papers were in the possession of her daughter, Camilla Bagg, who because of the unsatisfactory nature of her relationship with her mother (Camilla was left chiefly in the care of others during her mother's lifetime), wished to have time to study this material herself. This situation is fully

² *A Sacred Quest: The Life and Writings of Mary Butts* ed Christopher Wagstaff McPherson and Co New York 1995

³ Annie Ellerman (1894-1983) a friend of Butts. She was a novelist and critic as well as providing financial help to other writers. Her memoir of Mary Butts is reprinted in Wagstaffe's volume (see above).

documented in Roslyn Resto Foy's exploration of Butts' work, *Ritual, Myth and Mysticism in the work of Mary Butts*.⁴

When Butts' papers were eventually deposited at Yale, research was able to be undertaken by a new generation of scholars. The main publications resulting from this opening of the archive have been Roslyn Resto Foy's book referred to above, and two publications from Nathalie Blondel, *Scenes from the Life* the only complete biography, and *The Journals of Mary Butts*, an edited edition of Butts' journals which she kept from 1916 to the end of her life. New editions of her novels and short stories have also appeared.

Resto Foy's book's central theme is the way in which mysticism and magic and myth are represented in Butts' work, and she explains her approach as follows:

The difficulty of attempting a study of Mary Butts' work is due to the fact that she is extremely hard to categorise; in fact, Bruce McPherson, the publisher who reissued Butts' books in the United States, calls her a "sort of literary Rorschach test", and I wholeheartedly agree. From any given perspective, one can only attempt a reading of influential intellectual factors. I chose to introduce her work by finding a focus central to most of her fiction – myth and ritual with an underlying sense of the mystical."⁵

My approach is distinct from Resto Foy's as I intend to contextualise Butts' use of magic and draw attention to her very specific and idiosyncratic approach to ritual and occult practices. Other critics have placed her use of magic in a more general context and do not, I believe, give sufficient prominence to its practice. As this thesis will show, it was an intensely important part of her life, a driving force even, for many years. The theme of controlling and ordering the world, by means of ritual and the power of Will, is very important in Butts' work and also in the work of her contemporaries practising ritual magic.

Nathalie Blondel's two books, both the biography and edited diaries, are an invaluable source of information; the diaries in particular allowing the reader to trace

⁴ Resto Foy *Ritual, Myth and Mysticism in the work of Mary Butts: Between Feminism and Modernism* (Arkansas UP) 2000, Preface p xii –xiii

⁵ Resto Foy *Ritual Myth and Mysticism in the Works of Mary Butts* p 13

the evolution of Butts' involvement in magic and the impact which this had on her life and work, although Butts' magical studies and involvement with Crowley are not the main focus of her work.

Resto Foy and Blondel, by far the two most prominent writers on Butts, were writing at more or less the same time, and each acknowledges the other in their work.

Significant references to Butts also occur in biographies of Aleister Crowley, including those by John Symonds, Crowley's literary executor, who devotes a chapter to "Cakes of Light for Mary Butts" in his *The Great Beast*, and by Richard Kaczynski in his biography of Crowley, *Perdurabo* he writes of her time at Abbey of Thelema.

Important contextual information can also be found in the following books. A *Supernatural War* by Owen Davies,⁶ describes the increase in interest and use of both spiritualism, fetish objects and good-luck rituals by both active participants in the Great War and those on the home front. *Women Writers and Occult in Literature and Culture* by Miriam Wallraven discusses a number of female writers on the occult including the near contemporary of Mary Butts, Dion Fortune. Wallraven's purpose is to give these writers a distinctive voice and emphasise their importance in the development of contemporary occultism and spirituality.

My purpose is to re-examine Butts' life and work focusing very specifically on her study of magic and the way in which elements of this study are incorporated into her fiction. Her work, and the way in which she used it to communicate her beliefs and explorations, will be examined very much in the context of the time in which she wrote, that is in the 1920s and 30s. It will be necessary to include some discussion of the Parisian scene in order to show how Butts' was affected by the contemporary atmosphere.

To summarise therefore, this study of Mary Butts will complement existing scholarship by clearly focussing on the role of the occult in her published and private writings rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive critique of her work. Setting her life and works in the context of contemporary interest in the occult and ritual magic is also an important element of the thesis.

⁶ Owen Davies *A Supernatural War: Magic, Divination, and Faith during the First World War* (Oxford 2018)

This thesis is divided into sections which cover the following areas: her life and work, her personal view of magic, and the magical and ritualistic influences on her fiction, and the links with contemporary occult practices.

Chapter 1. Background, life and writing

This chapter will summarise the journey Mary Butts made, from a conventional upper middle class upbringing in rural England, to the bohemian demi-monde of London and Paris between the wars, to the Abbey of Thelema and back again to the rural West Country.

It was an extraordinary journey, but Mary Butts was an extraordinary woman. In all of her works she turns her attention to the world that lies beneath and behind the everyday, the “adventure of the sacred” as the poet Robin Blaser describes it.⁷ She herself wrote that “ we are spectators of a situation which is the mask for another situation, that existed perhaps in some remote age, or in a world that is outside time.”⁸ I will, in this chapter, draw on Butt’s own words to demonstrate the intersection between her private and public writings.

Louis Adeane, the left wing critic and poet, wrote in 1951 (14 years after her early death) :”From the first, she interpreted the world in terms of gods, demons and heroes, and this view ... conditioned all her work... her intense apprehension of alien but living forces within and without herself was formalised in terms of the occult ...”⁹ Mary Butts’ extraordinary world-view was formed by her Dorset childhood at Salterns, the house where she was born in 1890, and which took on a heightened significance as the recurring subject of her adult writing. She describes the house in mythical terms:

“ [A]t Salterns, at the dawn of my life, Power and Loveliness walked naked over East Dorset, side by side. Lay down to sleep together like gods on Purbeck, rose out of the dawn-washed sea. Aphrodite and her lover bestowed themselves in a nut – as where the Deity was seen by Julian of Norwich – a shell, an adder basking, the bracken picking up its hood, an owl sailing with lamps in its head.”¹⁰

In this one brief paragraph, Mary Butts has alluded to three of the chief influences on her life and writing; classical mythology, spiritual Christianity and animism, the gods

⁷ Quoted in Christopher Wagstaffe (ed) *The Sacred Quest* McPherson and Co 1995 p 165

⁸ *Sacred Quest* p102

⁹ Louis Adeane *An Appraisal of Mary Butts* originally published in World Review November 1951 quoted in Wagstaffe op cit

¹⁰ Mary Butts *The Crystal Cabinet* (Carcanet) p 22

she found in the natural world. She has also demonstrated the enormous power of *place* in her world view.

The idyllic childhood described above was interrupted by the death of her father in 1905, and her mother's subsequent remarriage. There were tensions between the two which included an implication on the part of her mother, of an inappropriate closeness between Mary and her step-father. The result was Mary's exile from Salterns as she was sent away to school.

She was finally able to achieve independence when at the age of 21 in 1911, she came into her inheritance from her father (another source of resentment on the part of her mother) and moved to London, where she soon showed her attraction to the bohemian and unconventional. She mixed with established literary figures such as Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis, however passion and depression were always to be (frequently destructive) elements in her life, but her literary ambitions were always present, and her affair with and subsequent marriage to John Rodker, owner of the Ovid Press, enabled her to both write and publish. At this time, 1916, she began to keep her diary, which she continued until the end of her life, and also began to write *Ashe of Rings* which was to be her first published novel.

That Butts at this period, and throughout the rest of her life, saw the influence of mysterious forces in all aspects of her everyday existence is illustrated by this typical diary entry from 1918:

On Sunday. Fell asleep "in fairy thrall" [Tennyson: The Lady of Shalott]. Then that great knock – terror. When I went into the kitchen still dazed with sleep, full of formal courtesies – I was alone. Behind me the gas ring roared, under the running tap the earth ran off the potatoes. I stood surrounded by the elements. In the studio they played "L'après midi d'une Faune". The fear became ecstasy – I almost saw."¹¹

What she "almost saw", was that fourth dimension which she perceived to lie behind everyday reality, and this will be explored in the sections of this chapter that deal more fully with her magical studies and her published writings.

¹¹ ed Nathalie Blondel *The Journals of Mary Butts* (Yale University Press 2002) Entry for 28.8.18 (referred to as Diary throughout the footnotes).

In 1919, another significant relationship began when she met Cecil Maitland who helped her husband run his Ovid Press. At this time, she was still with her husband however, and in the following year gave birth to her only child Camilla, about whom she seems to have had extremely ambiguous feelings for even before her birth.

In 1921, *Ashe of Rings* was being serialised in *The Little Review*, her husband's publication, but he found out about her affair with Maitland and left her. Butts chose to abandon her baby (for the next five years) in the care of a friend and leave for Paris with her lover who was to become her partner in the study and practice of magic, the subject in which she (though not her husband) was so profoundly interested. She was already drawn to Paris, its myths, magic and bohemian reputation.

The next significant period of Mary's life, her involvement with Aleister Crowley, is more fully described in the next section of this chapter, but following this encounter, she became increasingly dependent on drugs, and this together with her constantly questing nature, led to instability in her life. Throughout 1921 to 1923, she travelled around Europe with Maitland, spending time both in London and back in Paris. Post-war Paris was, for literary and artistic circles, a place of febrile activity, as Marie-Claire Bancquart describes it in her study of the Surrealists:

Dans l'explosion euphorique et fiévreuses de l'après-guerre, elle était toute prête à accepter les nouveautés d'une revolte dans la psychologie et dans l'écriture, voire même à les susciter.¹²

A series of lovers followed her break with Maitland, which finally occurred in 1925. She had around this time settled in Paris again where she mixed in the literary and artistic circles which included Jean Cocteau with whom she became close friends, but by 1929, she had become locked into a cycle of drug use and extreme poverty. This ended in 1930 when her mother, with whom she had had very difficult relations since the death of her father, brought her back from Paris to England.

Butts married again, to Gabriel Aitken, who fitted the pattern of Butt's other male partners, as he, like Maitland, was physically weak, psychically damaged, and

¹² M-C Bancquart *Paris des Surréalistes* (Paris:Seghers 1972) p 10 [In the euphoric and feverish post-war explosion, it [Paris] was ready to accept revolutionary new ideas in psychology and writing, or even to create them.] All translations by author unless otherwise stated.

probably homosexual. With Aitken she settled in Cornwall, though he left finally left her in 1934, and she died there, unexpectedly, at the age of 47; her account of her magical childhood at Salterns, *The Crystal Cabinet*, was published posthumously.

Her most significant published works are firstly her novels *Ashe of Rings*, *Armed with Madness* and *The Death of Felicity Taverner*, all of which are infused with her particular form of mysticism, *Armed with Madness* being, for example, a contemporary take on the Grail legends which so inspired her. Secondly, it is in her short stories that the influence of the occult is most clearly and unambiguously shown, for example, in the relatively straightforward ghost story *With and Without Buttons* for example, and the extraordinary, many layered *Mappa Mundi*, which deals with the occult history of the city which had such a strong influence on her, Paris. This will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3.

In May 1929, she completed a questionnaire submitted to her by *The Little Review* and answered the question “What is your world view?”:

Have a private view [sic] of the universe which does not seem to be reasonable or “scientifically true”, but which works for me, refreshes and delights me. I go by that, watch events and try not to twist them to fit. Am in the middle of a book¹³ which is supposed to show that my “hunch” about the universe is as likely to be true as any other, and much more interesting than most. Also that it is of most imposing antiquity.¹⁴

The works of Mary Butts have never achieved mainstream popularity, her adoption of the then revolutionary modernist style and her sometimes bleak subject matter being regarded as too challenging for a large readership to appreciate. A significant problem highlighted by contemporary critics however, was her preoccupation with magic and the pagan world. A short appraisal of her work was published in Cornwall, in the year of her death, and this directly alludes to the gulf between Butts’ view of the world and that of the general public:

Hidden beneath much of her writing is that pagan enjoyment of the ancient gods which obtrudes from some of her works But a heart communing with

¹³ Mary Butts *Death of Felicity Taverner* originally published in 1932

¹⁴ Published originally in *The Little Review* May 1929 reprinted in *The Sacred Quest* (ed) Wagstaffe p 126

the gods must acquire some of their secrets, and the translation of those secrets gliding smoothly from her pen would be much clearer to her open vision than to those of us overshadowed by material things, to whom any form of contemplation is a waste of time.¹⁵

Louis Adeane writing *An Appraisal of Mary Butts* in 1951 spoke of the “intrusion of the occult” into her writing, and went on to describe its unique qualities:

The effect is achieved cumulatively; the process by which shadow becomes alive and malignant ... is a delicate but convincing one ... the experience of reading this tense allusive prose is itself a preparation for such alchemy; the mind is gradually set on fire, made aware; disbelief is suspended.¹⁶

Mary Butts summed up her mystical enlightenment in the final pages of her autobiography *The Crystal Cabinet*. This was her last work, published posthumously, and it shows that to the end of her life she never lost her awareness of the power of magic in her life. She describes this magical event as taking place in the shadow of Badbury Rings, an Iron Age hill fort in her beloved Dorset, an incident that took place shortly before the outbreak of the Great War, and she demonstrates once again, the importance of place and the concepts of ritual and occult *correspondence* in her personal world view:

This afternoon I was received. Like any candidate for ancient initiations, accepted. Then in essence, but a process that time after time would be perfected in me. Rituals whose objects were knitting up and setting out, and the makings of correspondence, a translation which should be ever valid, between the seen and the unseen. Like any purified, I was put through certain paces; through certain objects, united to do their work, made from the roots of my nature to such refinements of sense – perceptions as I did know that I possessed, made me aware of those correspondences.¹⁷

Mary Butts spent the last years of her life in Cornwall; she had become a follower of Bernard Walke, the Anglo-Catholic vicar of St Hilary's near Marazion. His

¹⁵ David Hope, *Mary Butts, Fire-Bearer* (Sennen Pamphlet Series no 1 1937) quoted in Wagstaffe p22/3

¹⁶ Louis Adeane, *An appraisal of Mary Butts*, originally published in 1951 in (ed) Wagstaffe p103

¹⁷ Mary Butts, *The Crystal Cabinet* (Carcenet 1991) p 266

interpretation of Christianity was centred on the elements of ritual, drama and art, all of which were sacred to Mary. In his memoir “I Follow but Myself”, Frank Baker¹⁸, who had been the organist at Walke’s church wrote of Butts:

What had brought her to St Hilary? Was it Bernard Walke’s personality or the religion he taught or both? It hardly matters since it is obvious that here were the symbols of something she had almost lost and had to recover: a sanctification whose defilement she was then writing about in some of her stories which were collected after her death.”

The “defilement” referred to was Butts’ time with Crowley, which at the end of her life she seems to have regarded as something of a mistake, an aberration which had led to years of hardship and pain. She turned therefore in her time in Cornwall, to Christian mysticism, perhaps in an attempt to exorcise her occult past but nevertheless, proving that ritual was at the heart of her life and an element that she could not do without. She was a seeker to the end of her life.

This chapter has illustrated the evolution of Mary Butts’ passionate interest in the occult, and shown how she set about her explorations. I have shown how her strong attachment to *place* was a major influence in her work, and also how her seemingly restless quest for occult knowledge shaped her life and writing.

¹⁸ Frank Baker (1908 – 1983) – author of supernatural fiction and musician.

Chapter 2. The growth and development of her magical philosophy. Her influences. Aleister Crowley

In 1921, while living in Paris and awaiting her departure for the Abbey of Thelema, Mary Butts wrote in her diary, "I am now going to live the best part of my life."¹⁹ She was writing following her meeting in Paris with Aleister Crowley who she now saw as the means to further her quest for enlightenment and knowledge, of what she referred to in her diaries, as the fourth dimension. She was about to embark on the next phase of her magical education, in the company of the most notorious magician of her time. This chapter will throw some light on how she came to make that journey.

She believed that "we are spectators of a situation which is a mask for another situation, that existed perhaps in some remote age, or in a world that is outside time."²⁰ Her diaries show repeated attempts to expand on this statement and explain the way in which she felt that the unseen world interacted with the physical, and her reading, alongside her attempts at practical magic, clearly shows the way in which her philosophy was developing. In this chapter I intend to show how Butts' developed her deeply personal approach to the study of magic, and its practice. This aspect of her life and writing has not previously been the main focus of critical analysis, but is the theme of this chapter.

By 1916, Butts had begun what appeared to be a programme of reading, which she meticulously describes in her diaries, and which clearly indicates the way in which her intellectual curiosity turned repeatedly to the mysterious and occult, and her use of literature to underpin this curiosity was supported by her visits to those English landscapes traditionally associated with those aspects of hidden history, most notably, the Grail legends.

Interest in the Grail had been growing in the years before the First World War and immediately afterwards. The influential work by Jessie L Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* was published in 1919, and was an attempt to trace the development of the Grail and other Arthurian legends back to pre-Christian ritual, something that

¹⁹ Diary entry 7.3.21

²⁰ Louis Adeane, *An appraisal of Mary Butts* originally published in 1951 in (ed) Wagstaffe p102

Butts also referenced in *Armed With Madness*.²¹ Mary Butts very probably read, in addition to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, A E Waite's *The Hidden Church of the Holy Grail* and *The High History of the Holy Grail*, published in 1909 and 1910. She may well also have read Arthur Machen's own account of the legend *The Secret of the Sangraal* (published in 1907). Butts found the Somerset landscape around Glastonbury, which she visited with John Rodker her husband, full of "extreme energy"²², although sitting on the ruin of the Edgar Chapel, she also detected an "evil magic". The landscape did not reflect, she wrote: "XVIII century vistas of sublime prospects, not the tragedy of the reformation, not the medieval church, not the inanities of modern Anglicanism, nothing but the source of "mana"²³. Crystallised. Joseph of Arimathea, the "Larks of Wonder", Anthem, Sancgrail, Holy Thorn ... Origins, the mystery of whose cycle may be approaching its completion."²⁴

She had great awareness of the sometimes arbitrary means by which belief in magic can evolve within cultures, and how the concept of *mana*, her interpretation of animism, found its way into magical practices. Signs and correspondences were of particular significance, but she saw how the practitioner could manipulate these for his/her own ends :

Peacock feathers are dangerous to you if they are a symbol of evil in your imagination. Or rather this is a question of the fancy, arbitrary.

The "magician" goes further, assumes the objective existence of these phenomena, and might name the peacock a "death-bird", ie certain objects picked out arbitrarily by your fancy, might if you decided on them, do you evil.²⁵

The emphasis here is on the "you": Mary Butts was determined to establish her own magical references, but to do so she was willing to consult what material and experts were available at the time.

²¹ Jessie L Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* originally published in 1919, this is now known mainly for its influence on T S Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922).

²² Diary entry 8.7.18

²³ "Mana" is the name given by Butts to the elemental force that individuals try to acquire from a totem animal or god.

²⁴ Diary entry 10.7.18

²⁵ Diary entry 18.12.19

She felt that the world was underpinned by a “hint of rules”, which, given the complexities of the language she employed, she sometimes struggled to articulate:

For the last few years I have become gradually conscious of what appears a further reality linking phenomena, which can be observed. Not a perception so much as a hint of rules. These are difficult to remember.

(i) That at the “psychological” moment I came across the book, the information, even the experience & the person I should have most wished to enjoy. They rose like bubbles. ..

(ii) A faculty that varied of knowing what event would succeed – especially when my emotion was violent about them.

(iii) I have noticed that when one is possessed by an event or a thought one sees, or would see comes upon its similitudes.

Crossed sticks in Rue Cardinal Lemoine...

The similitudes of extremes...

Will. Be quiet. Let go. Attain. This seems to be the rule of a cosmic game. I wish I knew more mathematics.²⁶

She does not reveal any more about these crossed sticks, but we may infer that for her, they had taken on a particular occult significance – a correspondence, in other words. The influence of the theory of correspondences will be discussed later. Her magical thinking is, at this stage, still linked to the natural world, which she attempts to view through a lens of mysticism; the overriding “philosophy” lies in the attempt to both discern and create order out of apparently random events. Butts believes in an underlying “phenomenon” which is the mechanism by which order and significance is brought to the universe, if we are only able to open up to it. She does not set out the rules which govern the phenomenon, because she believes she lacks the mathematical knowledge required, but she does comment on the evidence as she

²⁶ Diary entry 10.12.19. The reference to crossed sticks refers to an earlier entry on 22.8.18 where she writes of “little signs”. The Rue Cardinal LeMoine is also referred to in “*From Altar to Chimney-piece*” as being a place in Paris given over to witchcraft.

perceives it.²⁷ The crossed sticks, for her, *must* have a deeper significance. Butts seems here to be on the brink of discovering some marvellous and important secret or truth about the universe; the truth which will make sense of the seemingly random nature of events which might in fact not be random at all. Trying to uncover the secret hidden pattern which lay behind coincidences and intuitions was her constant quest in life.

1919, three years after she began her Journal, appears to have been the year in which Butts took stock of her life so far, summarising those elements which had become more or less important to her, and analysing her comprehension of the occult world. And by 1919, she was being drawn even further into this study of magic, encouraged by some of her acquaintances including, "Philip [Heseltine]. He rationalised, induced me into the study of magic ..." Heseltine became better known as the composer Peter Warlock; a significant change of name in this context. Butts probably met him through her husband John Rodker. As well as introducing Butts to serious magical study, Heseltine had links to Aleister Crowley.²⁸

She wrote on the 3rd of June 1919:

(i) The nature of magic more apparent. A focusing point where reason and intuition meet. [Eliphas] Levi's *The History of Magic* analysed.²⁹ There is a disappointment, but for that incomparable meditation of the Buddha...

(ii) More vital here my friendship with Philip [Heseltine] who rationalises but does not rationalise away....

- A sense of certain objects charged with their past, or as foci for will – a worn farthing. These things easily forgotten as not part of the active brain's proper preoccupation.
- A perpetual apprehension of the relations of objects, sensual or emotional. That everything has its answer & correspondence in the depths and shallows of all nature... ³⁰

²⁷ A mathematical principle underlies the attempts of earlier writers to understand the nature of the universe, for example that of Iamblichus, who believed that mathematics was the key to understanding everything, both worldly and divine. Mary Butts read classical philosophers extensively.

²⁸ Crowley in fact suggested (with no evidence) that Heseltine's suspicious death in December 1930, apparently by gas poisoning, was the result of a magical ritual that went wrong.

²⁹ This is AE Wain's translation of *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* published in 1913

This represents a progression from the earlier somewhat formless musings on the “hints of rules” which connect seemingly random events. The language used is far more specific; she is now *certain* that hidden connections permeate the world.

Mention is again made of the magical concept of correspondences, or magical equivalents, which is explicitly expressed in Charles Baudelaire’s influential 1861 poem *Correspondances*, part of the sequence *Les Fleurs du Mal*. This poem (and indeed all of Baudelaire’s work) was an important influence on writers, artists and occultists of the fin-de-siècle. The key themes to be found in his work – mystery, sadness, loss, the sacred and the profane, would all be found in the work of the later symbolists and modernists (Mary Butts herself for example) Correspondences have been used however throughout the history of magic, for example in both hermetic magic and modern Wicca, and continue to be so today, attaching meanings over and above the obvious to various objects, colours and other elements.³¹

The symbols and correspondences are there all around for the aspiring adept, such as Mary Butts, to interpret:

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles ;
L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.³²

Baudelaire’s poem articulated a magical idea that pre-dated him by many centuries. It derives ultimately from classical Greek neo-platonic thought and concerned the relationship between gods and men; it was also developed in the eighteenth century by Emanuel Swedenborg with his doctrine of “interworld correspondence”, though his doctrine is explicitly Christian. Baudelaire in his work, speaks of “une ténébreuse et profonde unité” (a mysterious and profound unity) connecting events and experiences.³³

³⁰ Diary entry 3.6.19

³¹ This, for example, is a comprehensive list of magical correspondences compiled with reference to the teachings of Aleister Crowley <http://www.billheidrick.com/works/mcor.htm>

³² Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Atlantic Editions p 17. First published in 1857). [Nature is a temple, where living pillars sometimes allow confused words to leave; man passes through forests of symbols which observe him with familiarity.]

³³ C Minahen, *Correspondence theory and the case of Baudelaire’s sphinx*, quoted in *Romance Quarterly* 39 no 2 (1992)

Mary Butts' husband, John Rodker, did not share his wife's interest in the occult and perhaps inevitably, the couple began to drift apart, and in Cecil Maitland, who worked at Rodker's publishing company, Ovid Press, Mary found both a romantic interest and a partner in her magical enterprise. Maitland's interest in the occult was wide ranging and Mary was inevitably drawn to this. He himself said that he had attended a Black Mass in Edinburgh. Douglas Goldring who wrote a memoir in 1943 which included an account of Butts and Maitland, said the latter was interested in "Everything to do with esoteric religion and its practitioners, everything to do with Magic – black or white ..." ³⁴

Under the influence of Maitland, her interest in the paranormal increased alongside the interest in ritual magic, and she began undertaking automatic writing. Her interest in the creation of ritual grew, and dream journeys or astral projections became more intense, with every nuance being recorded in her journals. ³⁵

Having left her husband, she compiled, with Maitland, a "Bibliography of Magical Books" which she described as "literature of the fourth dimension" clearly illustrating the eclecticism of their studies, the books were as follows:

Robert Kirk – *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*
(1691)

Louis Martonie – *Piété au Moyen Age* (1855)

Reginald Scot - *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584)

Kramer and Sprenger – *Malleus Malificarum* (1489)

George MacDonald - *At the Back of the North Wind*

Walter de la Mare - *The Listeners* ³⁶

Together they read Venitiana's *The Great Grimoire* and *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage*. ³⁷

³⁴ Douglas Goldring, *South Lodge – Reminiscences of Violet Hunt, Ford Madox Ford and the English Review Circle* (1943) quoted in Blondel *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life* (MacPherson New York 1998) p72/3

³⁵ For example, this account of an astral journey recorded in the diary on 22.12.19

Yesterday – I had forseen the white patch into which I should pass. I am in it now... The world wrapped in a light mist with a ring of stars overhead.

³⁶ Diary entry 29.3.20

Since these texts were of great significance to Butts and Maitland, some explanatory details are appropriate:

³⁷ Diary entries for 9.4.20 and 12.4.20 respectively.

Mary Butts' reading list of 29.3.1920

- Robert Kirk was a Scottish Episcopalian minister who collected the supernatural stories he heard from his parishioners. He used these as evidence for what he called "a middle nature betwixt man and angel". He believed in the existence of a supernatural world, parallel to the physical world, a belief that was shared by Mary Butts.
- Alfred (Louis) de Martonne was a nineteenth century historian and archivist. Another of his books was *L'Oeil du Cyclope, origins de Paris, les Sièges de Paris, role de Paris dans le présent et dans l'avenir, les Prophéties contre Paris, les Enceintes de Paris, leur Valeur, Caractèteres divers de la Préeminence de paris, son Autorité Nationale* (1875)³⁸. In view of the interest Butts showed in the more esoteric aspects of Parisian history (especially in her short fiction), she may well have consulted this also.
- Unlike Kirk's book, the *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, was written to disprove the existence of witchcraft. Reginald Scott's aim was to show how apparent supernatural effects could be achieved by conjuring and by exploiting the credulity of witnesses. Butts was never credulous about magic and the supernatural and was willing to consider all points of view. It should also be added that this book, despite its actual premise, did in fact act as an important source for information on actual magical practices, and as such was of great interest to the aspiring student of the occult.
- George Macdonald (1824-1910) was a Scottish Calvinist minister who struggled with some of the more rigorous aspects of his faith, for example, the concept that only the "elected" could be saved, as he believed that all men had the potential to be united with God. *At the Back of the North Wind* was ostensibly a children's book, published in 187. It is about a child given glimpses of a magical world existing behind reality, but which can only be

³⁸ [The eye of the Cyclops, origins of Paris, the seats (of organisations) in Paris, the role of Paris in the present and the future, prophecies against Paris, the enclosures of Paris, their merit, various characters in the pre-eminence of Paris, its national authority.]

appreciated after death which equates with enlightenment. This theme is of course to be found throughout Mary Butts' own work.

- The *Malleus Maleficarum* is the well-known witch-hunting manual from the middle ages. This text took the existence of witchcraft for granted, and contained instructions for the contemporary magistrates on how to deal with the cases that came before them. It also contained "proof" that women were more susceptible to practising witchcraft than men. For someone interested in the history of witchcraft (and given the paucity of such historical material in the early twentieth century), this would have been essential reading for Butts.
- They also read *Kilmeny* and *The Listeners*, both poems dealing with the supernatural; the first with abduction by beings from the otherworld, and the second with haunting and communication between the worlds. *Kilmeny*, written by the Scottish shepherd poet, James Hogg (1770-1835), describes the journey of the young virginal Kilmeny to the domain of the fairies, to a sort of fourth dimension, almost impossible to describe to the uninitiated:

For Kilmeny had been she knew not where,

And Kilmeny had seen what she could not declare

The land of vision, it would seem,

A still, an everlasting dream ...³⁹

Butts' references are to the 1845 edition of the *Great Grimoire*, which had a great influence on the French occultist Eliphas Lévi. A.E. Waite, of the Golden Dawn wrote that it was "one of the most atrocious of its class [ie grimoires]; it has a process in Necromancy which is possible, say some occult writers ... only to a dangerous maniac or an irreclaimable criminal ..." ⁴⁰ The *Book of Abramelin the Mage*, was read by Butts in the 1897 translation by Samuel MacGregor Mathers, also of the Golden Dawn. The text was traditionally said to have been produced in the fourteenth

³⁹ James Hogg *Kilmeny* <http://www.bartleby.com/41/447.html>

⁴⁰ www.esotericarchives.com/solomon/gg1421.htm

century and had a profound effect on both the Golden Dawn and Aleister Crowley, who referred to it extensively at his Abbey of Thelema. The book provides details of invocations designed to help the adept find buried treasure, perform love spells and achieve invisibility after achieving communication with the seeker's guardian angel. Both texts will be shown to have a profound influence on the French occult revival of the late nineteenth century and continued to do so in the years between the Wars. They were in effect, magical recipe books for the adept.

This list illustrates that Maitland and Butts read a variety of texts that acknowledged the existence of a supernatural world, including in their studies, contemporary poetry, traditional ballads and children's books. In an era when occult texts were not as easily acquired as they can be today, particularly in English, the aspiring student was forced to look for inspiration from a wide variety of sources⁴¹. Two of the books mentioned however *The Great Grimoire* and *Abramelin the Mage* are classic and highly influential occult texts, Despite her systematic approach to the seeking out of magical knowledge, she maintained an equivocal and critical relationship with the works she used and this is indicated by her comments in 1920:

“These books on occultism with their bastard words, credulities, falsities on facts, emotion and aesthetic falsities, inwardly revolt me. The symbols save when they were purely numeral and abstract, seemed but poor correspondences.”⁴²

These comments once again indicate how crucial the concept of “correspondences” was in Butts' understanding of the universe; it also however, indicates the rather erratic path she took through life. Although her interest in magic was present throughout her life, she was far from dedicated to a single path of discovery. Her involvement with, then estrangement from, Crowley indicates this, as does the frequency with which she moved from one lover to the next. She was passionate and committed but also sceptical and prone to move from one enthusiasm to another.

⁴¹ ⁴¹ A chapter in Alison Butler's *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic* (Palgrave 2011) is entitled “Magical Libraries: What Occultists Read”. This is a review of two nineteenth century occult libraries that of Frederick Hockley (1809 – 1885) and of the Order of the Golden Dawn. This gives a good indication of the variety of sources used by the serious student. Hockley's personal library includes works on “... druids, folklore, palmistry, Neoplatonism, mesmerism, mysticism and cabala [m]ost of th nineteenth century material, however, deals with astrology, Freemasonry and spiritualism..” Butler p127

⁴² Diary 21.4.20

Butts found her way forward by turning to the classical studies of her youth and in particular by her reading of Jane Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903)⁴³, "... the profoundest study of my adolescence – mystery cults from Trace to Eleusis. I remembered the Bacchae. There are my formulae, there my words of power."⁴⁴ It was all the more important to Butts "because it was written by a woman, with no magical thesis to prove. There I know I shall find my way."⁴⁵ Both of these aspects, the importance of the feminine, and the antiquity of occult practices are often explored in Butts' works.

The magical studies continued therefore, and Butts and Maitland ritually mixed their blood, to effect a magical wedding:

[Maitland] and I are in love with the fourth dimension ... I made him fetch a corn razor and slashed a cross on his wrist and on mine. Three slashes to each in my eagerness to draw blood. We sucked each other's cuts and kissed them, and lay back licking our own wrists.... no more ritual than I have said... I felt certain of the reality of our association."⁴⁶

"Some day", wrote Mary in her diary, "I shall be an adept",⁴⁷ and in January 1921, prior to her departure for Paris with Maitland, she wrote:

magical secret seems to me to be simply this. The Great Work is to discover an automatic strengthening and intensification for the will. To have it one should know to will, and who does?⁴⁸

The notion of the will as being crucial to the development of magical powers and enlightenment, would lead Butts inevitably to Crowley, with his particular focus on (and interpretation of) the force of the will.

To further clarify her ambitions and intentions at this time, April 1921, she drew up what might be termed her occult manifesto, its emphasis very much on her own very specific aims, ambitions and intentions. It is clear from this document that even

⁴³ This is an analysis of ancient Greek festivals. In the view of Harrison (a view shared by Butts), these rituals led to creation of myths, and not the other way round.

⁴⁴ Diary entry 21.4.20

⁴⁵ Diary entry 21.4.20

⁴⁶ Diary entry 29.3.20

⁴⁷ Diary entry 12.4.20

⁴⁸ Diary entry 21.1.21

before she turned to Crowley, she had a well-developed sense of what she wanted to achieve through magic:

- 1 I want to study and enjoy, and to enter if I can into the fairy world, the mythological world and the world of the good ghost story.
- 2 I want by various mystical practices and studies to produce my true nature, and enlarge my perceptions.
- 3 I don't only want to find my true will. I want to do it. So I want to learn how to form a magical link between myself and the phenomena I am interested in. I want power.⁴⁹
- 4 I want to find out what is the essence of religion, study the various ideas of god under their images.
- 5 I want to make this world into material for the art of writing.
- 6 I want to observe the pairs of opposites, remembering *that which is below is as that which is above*. From this I wish to formulate clearly, the hitherto incommunicable idea of a third perception. This is a perception of the nature of the universe as yet unknown to man, except by intuitions which cannot be retained, and by symbols whose meaning cannot be retained also. I want to fix it in man's mind.
- 7 I want to write a book not about an early theocracy and fall of man (the most respectable occultists fail here [eg] Stanislas de Guaita⁵⁰ but a book written about the subject, historically, under terms of human fallability without deification of Pythagoras or the writers of the Kaballah. A book with no balls about secrets, or sneers at the uninitiated. Above all with no worship of the past. A book to show the relation of art to magic, and shew the artist as the true, because the oblique, adept.

51

This is the most significant of Butts' statements on the role of magic and ritual in her life. It marks a confidence in her intentions which is lacking in her earlier tentative attempts to formalise her thoughts, and crucially all of the statements begin,

⁴⁹ The last sentence is quoted by Blondel in *Scenes from the Life* p 100, however it is omitted from the version given in her edition of Butts' diaries.

⁵⁰ 1861-1897. French poet, mystic and occult adept. Founder of the Cabbalistic Order of the Rosicrucians.

⁵¹ Diary entry 19.4.21

unequivocally with “I”. She has realised the importance of the ego in achieving her aims, and she equates magical success leading to the achievement of real power, on a level with professional success as a writer; one in fact will lead to the other. It is this need for power achieved through magical means that brings Mary Butts into the circle of Aleister Crowley, for whom power was of overriding importance.

This focus on the importance of the individual to attain power, seems to lead inevitably to Mary Butts’ encounter with the self-proclaimed foremost magician of the period. However, the confidence apparent in Butts’ statement of intent, indicates that Crowley would not find in Butts an individual ready to submit to his own will. Butts’ own literary ambitions are well to the fore here and she saw the practice of magic as serving a practical purpose in her life in giving her both the material for her writing and also the mental strength to do the work. For her, magic was both a pathway to true self-knowledge and a means by which she could begin to describe the hitherto indescribable. The eclecticism of her reading which included as we have seen, fairytales, folk ballads and stories of the supernatural, as well as more conventional occult texts, is reflected in this document. She also refreshingly, sets herself apart from other writers who, she believes, have tried and failed to do this, by saying that she wants to write for everyone; to reveal secrets if that is necessary and not keep them close in order to “sneer at the uninitiated”. The traditional forms of esoteric wisdom, the Kaballah and the ancient Greek, are also questioned. All of this would be enough eventually to put her into conflict with Crowley.

Finally, in Paris in March 1921, they met. At this time Crowley was about to leave for the Abbey of Thelema at Cefalu on Sicily. This was Crowley’s grand project; taking his inspiration from François Rabelais’ *Abbaye de Thélème*⁵² where visitors devoted themselves to their own pleasure, he attempted to create in a small house on Sicily, a magical college where students would devote themselves to his works and the discovery of their true potential.

Soon after meeting him she was quoting approvingly his most famous aphorism, “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law”, and before actually meeting him, she was happy to state that “I believe the Beast to be a technical expert of the highest

⁵² In François Rabelais’ *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, 5 linked fantastical novels written between 1532 and 1564.

order”.⁵³ Butts, though wary, was confident of her own ability to withstand the experience, less so about that of Maitland: “I shall learn and live and suffer. He will learn and suffer and perhaps die.”⁵⁴ It appears that Crowley was himself somewhat concerned about Maitland whom he extravagantly describes as follows,” [f]ew jewels in my collection of freaks are more precious than Cecil Maitland”.⁵⁵ He had a jaundiced view of the relationship with Butts on which he commented with characteristic venom, “...he [Maitland] suffered from hydrophobia and did not wash for eighteen months. This romantic situation enflamed the virgin heart of a large, white, red-haired maggot named Mary Butts ...”⁵⁶ His description (after the event) of the couple in Paris, prior to the departure for Cefalu was that they were “idle and mentally muddled” and “playing at magick”.⁵⁷ Despite this verdict, he was prepared to take them on as pupils, “With my invariable optimism, I picked out all the promising points and overlooked the faults.... Their wretchedness kindled my pity ...”⁵⁸ Crowley’s analysis of the couple’s relationship was cynical but not without an element of truth, Mary did seem to have a compulsion to enter into relationships with damaged or weak men. Crowley was both eloquent and scathing on the subject of Mary’s need to experience her partner’s dependence on her:

In the case of Maitland, the moment he showed the wish to become independent, the vanity of Mary Butts was wounded and her jealousy inflamed. She might have won the love of a first-rate man, but she preferred to dull the anguish of the consciousness that she was a weakling, as she admitted, by keeping in abject dependence on her a man on whom she could look down. She accordingly did all she could to push him back into the mire of misery and self-contempt; and of course, no sooner was my influence removed, than he slipped back into the stinking slime from which I tried to rescue him.”⁵⁹

⁵³ Diary entry 18.8.20

⁵⁴ Blondel Nathalie *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life* New York (MacPherson and Co) p102

⁵⁵ Crowley *Confessions* Chapter 91 <http://hermetic.com/crowley/confessions/prelude.html> (accessed September 2017)

⁵⁶ *Confessions* Ch 91

⁵⁷ *Confessions* Ch 91

⁵⁸ *Confessions* Ch 91

⁵⁹ *Confessions* Ch 91

Crowley here was also taking an opportunity, as he so often did, to disparage one of his pupils; Butts in turn believed that Crowley was trying to break up the relationship for reasons best known to himself (even apparently trying to drown Maitland on one occasion). On the 7th of March 1921 however, she declared: "I am now going to live the best part of my life" . On the 11th of the month, while still in Paris, Crowley initiated her to the first degree of his Ordo Templi Orientis.

During the spring of 1921, Butts and Crowley engaged in philosophical debate; it is clear from her records of these discussions that she was not in awe of Crowley, but felt fully able to engage with him, and use his knowledge as a springboard for her own spiritual exploration. She wrote: "Aleister is an assistance, not a road nor a card."⁶⁰

Not all of the magical techniques he proposed worked for Mary, and her rather ambiguous attitude to his practices are apparent in this diary entry:

No success with Crowley's receipt (*sic*) for going on the astral plane. But when I write, or am moved in certain oblique ways, I do it inevitably. Is magic too direct an approach? ... Direct magical practice fatigues and rather disgusts me (I except the evocations and the earth pentagrams).⁶¹

Butts is here expressing her preference for and veneration of, the sort of natural, "Folk" magic which features so much in her novels and stories. From June to September 1921, Maitland and Butts undertook a programme of magical instruction from Crowley at the Abbey of Thelema. On 7.7.21, she wrote "AC shews me a desolate path." This comment may have been made as result of a ceremony in which she, Maitland and Crowley participated on the 5th of July. Crowley's own account is as follows:

2.00 pm. The ceremony of preparing the Cakes of Light. A young cock is to be Peter Paul in to the Catholic Church by CJA Maitland, the son of an apostate Romish Priest, and therefore the ideal "Black Hierophant". Mary Butts and I are to be its sponsors. Peter and Paul are the founders of the Christian Church, and we want its blood to found our own church. Alostrael then dances

⁶⁰ Blondel, *Scenes* p 100

⁶¹ Diary entry 15.3.21

against the will of Mary, on my swearing to give to her the half of my Kingdom. She demands PP's head on the Disk. The cock is slain in honour of Ra-Hoor-Khuit⁶², who is invoked before the killing.

Following this ceremony, Butts and Maitland "took the oath of Affiliate and signed the Abbey's record."⁶³

Mary Butts' own diaries have provided us with an extremely valuable chronological account of the time she and Maitland spent with Crowley at Thelema, and this account clearly shows that although Butts was willing to accept guidance and instruction from Crowley, she was a far from subservient participant, and in fact, highly critical of some of his methods. Throughout her time on Sicily, she continued to follow her own path, in particular, undertaking many extraordinarily intense astral journeys, for example:

... falling pine-trees, a huge black bird darting down ... into a circle of fire....a Sphinx. Then the dark cave, a furious sea breaking through it this time – white water. I was afraid – went through – water sucking through a kind of blow-hole, then the open coast, black rocks & white sea rising, a frightful place. Then, as the spray rose, a shaft of light came down & mixed, & the two mixed and whirled until I came back unable to hold it any longer.⁶⁴

Later, in September, she comments, "I see that astral journeys, with or without drugs (some of my best have been without) can be exploited more than is supposed."⁶⁵

All of Crowley's pupils at the Abbey were required to keep journals of their experiences, which everyone there was able to read and analyse. Butts wrote, for example, of her fear of the supernatural, "... the fear of fear was like going over an edge, and I felt that I was suffocating. (AC said next day that I may have been

⁶² This was one of the deities worshipped at Thelema who incorporated aspects of the traditional Egyptian gods, especially Horus.

⁶³ Quoted in John Symonds, *The Great Beast: the Life and Magic of Aleister Crowley* (London: Mayflower 1973) p 299-300.

⁶⁴ Diary entry 20.7.21

⁶⁵ Diary entry 1.9.21

attacked by an astral shape or be on the verge of remembering my last death, which had been violent – drowning?)”⁶⁶

During her time at the Abbey, Butts became increasingly disillusioned with Crowley (though as she made clear, she had never regarded him as the only possible path to enlightenment, unlike other followers), partly because of his obnoxious personality and lack of regard for his followers, also because the living conditions at Thelema were atrocious, and because she was appalled by the presence of young children at Crowley’s rituals.

When she left the Abbey in September 1921, her verdict on her experiences with Crowley, was that he was a “sham” and that “I’d rather be the writer I am capable of becoming than an illuminated adept, magician, magus master of this temple or another.”⁶⁷

After leaving Cefalu, Butts and Maitland returned initially to Paris, they were without purpose and in Butts’ own words, “ For weeks Cecil and I have played at being forlorn children ...”⁶⁸ She continued to take large quantities of heroin and undertook more astral journeys. They both however continued the practice of magic and Butts’ consciousness of the fourth dimension was as strong as it ever had been; she “[l]istened to the magic rising in Cecil’s room. Watched the ghost trap on the ceiling. Hypnotised by the silver glass ball ...”⁶⁹

Back in London, both became convinced that their house was haunted, and that Crowley was trying to harm them. This was the beginning of something of a mental collapse for Butts, from which she only recovered towards the end of her life. They were at this time sharing their home with Leah Hirsig, who had also spent time at Thelema as Crowley’s partner in sexual magic, his so-called “Scarlet Woman”, and Butts believed her to be part of the psychic plot against them. Butts commented to Hirsig that this plot was hatched by “an erotic old megalomaniac [who] wanted you, and your money, and the prestige your personality would give him. Your lover

⁶⁶ Blondel, *Scenes* p 104 This is evidently from Butts’ diary but Blondel does not include the entry in her edition of the diaries, though she quotes it here (without a date).

⁶⁷ Blondel, *Scenes* p 105

⁶⁸ Diary entry 10.10.21

⁶⁹ Blondel, *Scenes* p 110

prevented this. He has *not* yet quite given up and has sent a subtle fanatical sweet, accommodating woman to see what she can do.”⁷⁰

An objective analysis of the relationship between Butts and Crowley is not easy to effect, since both regarded the other with some degree of acrimony following the time at Cefalu. That both *did* have an effect on the other is clear. As we have seen before, Crowley in his comments about Cecil Maitland was also happy to criticise Butts for her own weakness; however, at times he was willing to acknowledge the depth of her occult knowledge. On 4th of August 1921, Butts wrote, “Read more [of] Crowley’s *biographia mystica*.”⁷¹ In fact she did more than read Crowley’s work. He himself tells us that:

I showed the manuscripts of [Magick] to Soror Rhodon⁷² and asked her to criticise it thoroughly. I am extremely grateful to her for her help, especially in indicating a large number of subjects which I had not discussed. At her suggestion I wrote essay upon essay to cover every phase of the subject. The result has been the expansion of the manuscript into a vast volume, a complete treatise upon the theory and practise of magick, without any omissions.”⁷³

Butts’ reading on the subject had obviously been extensive and had been carried out in sufficient depth to impress the Master himself, though as we have seen, he was very far from being overtly complimentary towards her. It was of course Crowley’s habit to refrain from giving praise to anyone but himself.

The reasons for her eventual disillusionment with Crowley could have been predicted before she ever went to Cefalu. Her own sense of self was too strong, her own magical ambitions too well-developed. She was, in short, far too strong-willed and opinionated to fit the usual profile of Crowley disciples. She also had, as we have seen, a certain scepticism concerning the use of highly regulated magical practices, with rules being imposed, and leaned far more towards a more personal relationship with ritual.

⁷⁰ Blondel, *Scenes* p 114

⁷¹ This was *Magick in Theory and Practice*, published in 1929.

⁷² Butts’ name at Thelema – a reference to her mass of red hair.

⁷³ ed Symonds and Grant, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley* quoted in *The Journals of MB* p 185

Her own study of magic enabled her to speak to Crowley and criticise him as an equal, which was something he was unable to deal with, and her personal practices, such as the astral journeys which were so crucial to her understanding of the universe, did not need Crowley to validate them. Her seven-fold magical statement of intent showed how her focus was on her own self and her ability to formulate the “rules” governing the universe and its’ magical correspondences. She was not, as Crowley wrote of her and Maitland, “playing at magick”.⁷⁴

Her highly critical readings of a variety of occult and supernatural texts had given her confidence in her own ability to separate the meaningless from the worthwhile. Her sense and interpretation of the magical correspondences in the universe, which were so critical to her, were too personal for her to accept without question the teachings of another, especially one as self-absorbed as Crowley. His need was for disciples willing to sacrifice their own ego in exchange for the enlightenment that only his direction could supply, and Mary Butts soon found out at Cefalu, that she did not need this, nor was she prepared to conform to his own particular rules.

We can compare diary entries she made before and after her time at Thelema, which illustrate the evolution of her views on Crowley. On 18.8.20 she wrote, “I believe the Beast to be a technical expert of the highest order.”⁷⁵ In January 1922 after a period of reflection, she was attempting to sum up her experiences and writing in a very different manner:

...I must try and get clear about Aleister Crowley.

I am afraid of him “somewhere”. There is a point of fear in my mind.

I know that “a new word” is wanted, & went to explore his, because I thought that a new word might be made by man exploring the world not visible to his senses – where he might find:

(i) another order of beings

(ii) undeveloped powers in himself

⁷⁴ Crowley, *Confessions* Chapter 91 The spelling “magick” is found in the 17th century work *De Occulta Philosophia* of Cornelius Agrippa. Crowley revived the spelling to distinguish between ritual and stage magic, ie prestidigitation.

⁷⁵ Diary entry 18.8.20

(iii) both.

My belief was & is (iii).

But I saw at Cefalu the familiar features of religion come again. And obscenity. And something exceedingly bad (not obscene), & something powerful.

“Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law”. That is all right. But people are to be made aware of this by fear, coercion, bribery etc, a religious movement re-enacted. The founder is to be Crowley & his gulled, doped women. I don’t doubt most new religions had some such start, but I feel that even Mahomet was better.⁷⁶

Mary Butts had expected a great deal from her time with Crowley. He had a great reputation for his magical abilities, and this had encouraged Butts to think of him as the ideal teacher, however, the relation succeeded only in encouraging doubt and confusion, and the assurance that Butts showed when her she and Maitland studied together seems to have dissipated. In March of 1922, she is still trying to make sense of her experiences:

I can do automatic “drawing” in my room... The same old patterns, bad pentagrams, triangles, broken designs and things like a phallos. In this writing the usual order is reversed. One writes consciously – the effort is to write, not to stop writing. Automatically, one writes without any effort ...What stratum of mind is touched? I “wanted” a script – sensational for preference. Deep contemplative states I do not find useful, a lazy inattention works best. Is there a separate state to which these things belong, an occult order by itself in which Crowley deals? I mean is daemon-raising & casual automatic writing all part of one cheese – so that the whole preoccupation would always be quickened by any part?⁷⁷

Despite her evident confusion, some magical activities had a powerful and positive effect on her, the most frequently mentioned practice in all of Butts’ writing, being that of undertaking astral journeys. These are described as taking place throughout

⁷⁶ Diary entry 11.1.22 London

⁷⁷ Diary entry 19.3.22 London

her life, before during and after her time with Crowley, as well as in her fiction, and are of course an entirely solitary activity. This surely is one of the chief means by which she attempted to achieve the second of her stated aims, “I want by various mystical practices and studies to produce my true nature, and enlarge my perceptions.” In her diaries are multiple accounts of these experiences and these show that she needed no help in achieving the desired result; the power came wholly from within. Crowley could not improve on her own technique. As already said, “[n]o success with Crowley’s receipt for going on the astral plane.”⁷⁸

Astral journeys had been an important component of the occult armoury for many centuries, back to classical times; they had their place in Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, and Theosophy. According to these traditions, “the astral body is an intermediate body of light linking the rational soul to the physical body while the astral plane is an intermediate world of light between heaven and earth composed of the spheres of the planets and stars ... The idea of the astral figured prominently in the work of the nineteenth century occultist Eliphas Levi ... and afterwards by other esoteric movements.”⁷⁹ In a conversation with the author Paul Newman, Pat Doherty, who had a relationship with Crowley much later in his life, throws some light on his attitude towards these astral journeys, “You see, I could go to places he could not. Astral spaces that could only be accessed by women. I could go there and raise certain powers and bring them back, and activate them. AC couldn’t do this. He needed women with a mediumistic gift.”⁸⁰

What brought strength to Doherty seems to have done so only intermittently to Butts. While her perceptions were indeed enlarged, she seems to have struggled with her “true nature”, alternatively proud of her abilities and disgusted with the whole occult world. As to power, which she unequivocally demanded in 1921, her explorations left her only full of doubt. Years after her time with Crowley, and with the relationship with Maitland also over, she attempted to sum up her thoughts and experiences:

Five years ago I first became anxious to make a study of phenomena I felt were not explicable by understood physical laws – I date this *conscious* wish from my first acquaintance with Cecil Maitland, though previously I had

⁷⁸ Diary entry 15.3.21

⁷⁹ www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/astralprojection

⁸⁰ Paul Newman, *The Treggerthen Horror* (Abraxas Editions 2005) p70

studied “occultism” & found it stirring, but unsatisfactory, a maze of blind alleys. I made various attempts, scrying, automatic writing, read up spiritualism, mystery cults, some neoplatonism & to no conclusion. Crowley if anything, would have convinced me there was nothing in it. After five years & lately I have not interested myself so much, realise that I have observed, all my life, a series of phenomena, not all subjective.... which I now believe to be part of a series though the connection between them is not clear... The stage I have arrived at is to connect these events with each other & to arrive at a theory for them. I have no doubt of them ...& my realisation has come slowly like a growth in nature, not an attempt to pry.”⁸¹

The decision not “to pry” meant that further attempts at systematic study were no longer undertaken, instead it seems that Butts focussed on channelling her experiences into her writing. She accepted that the sort of truths she thought she would uncover with Crowley would always elude her, and became reconciled to the knowledge she had herself acquired:

This mysticism of mine, enough for me because I “get” & “know” things which I cannot describe or explain, on what is it based? What last step do I have to make? But if I could make, under no matter what image or indirection, a living clarity of it, great art & great power – life giving – would flow through me, at least to refresh my generation.”⁸²

This chapter shows the absolute fundamental importance of Mary Butts’ quest for esoteric knowledge, and how this drove her to search for experiences throughout her life and which permeated her writing. The next chapter will show how Butts used these magical experiences and influences to create a unique and idiosyncratic world in her fiction.

⁸¹ Diary entry February 1925 (exact date not given in text) p214

⁸² Diary entry March 1927 (exact date not shown in text) p249

3. The influence of magic and ritual in her published works.

Mary Butts recorded the most important elements of her magical journey from her diary, where she expressed herself frankly in order to better describe the occult world to which she was so attracted, into her fiction which all to a greater or lesser degree references the persistence of myth, the power of ritual and mysticism, and the magic and power associated with certain places. This chapter is not an attempt at a comprehensive critical review of all of Butts' published work that would be outside the scope of this thesis, but more specifically, an examination of the very specific role of magical and ritualistic elements in her writing. In addition, the aim of this chapter is to link Butts' subject matter with the three environments in which she spent her life, that is, the bohemian London and Paris of between the wars, and the English countryside of her childhood, to which she ultimately returned.

Butts' fiction was a way of communicating her very particular view of the universe, though her style of writing, complex and opaque, has never garnered her a large readership. It is fortunate that we have both Butts' private diaries and published work so that we can see how the thoughts she expressed in the diary were incorporated into her public writing. These views, and her way of expressing them, were not always readily understood by this audience. As Foy says, "Butts' complexity and her enigmatic concerns with timeliness, the classic, her race and its heritage, the reality of the mystical experience and of magic, the relation of art to magic ... make her work and her vision difficult to categorise ..." ⁸³ Patrick Wright, in his essay on Butts entitled "Coming back to the shores of Albion", also makes this point, that her style of writing only increased the sense of strangeness and obscurity:

Mary Butts' books are secret writingsthey seem to crave obscurity demanding the devotion of a few select initiates rather than the attention of a public..." ⁸⁴

But nevertheless, she did offer her work to the public for them to interpret – if they were able.

⁸³ Resto Foy, *Ritual Myth and Mysticism in the work of Mary Butts* (university of Arkansas) 2000 p 11

⁸⁴ Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old County* (OUP new edition 2009) p119

Allusions to the magical and mystical are found in much of Butts' work, but certain of her works, particularly her earliest novel, *Ashe of Rings*, and her short stories, have a very significant focus on the occult, and reflect her own occult preoccupations. The chronology of Butts' writing is an important factor when determining how this writing mirrored her spiritual development. *Ashe of Rings* was written in 1921 when she was relatively new to the systematic study of magic; her first book of short stories, *Speed the Plough* was published in 1923, the second *Several Occasions* in 1932. Other stories were written some time later (and only collected and published after her death, as *Last Stories*)⁸⁵, after her experiences in Paris and at the Abbey of Thelema with Crowley, and this resulted in a change of both emphasis and attitude. *Ashe of Rings* in particular is deeply influenced by her Dorset country upbringing and the power she experienced in the ancient landscape. In it she creates an intensely mythologised world full of the power of place and inspired by her own Dorset childhood.

I am concentrating on specific aspects of her works for the following reasons. Other critics, Resto Foy, Patrick Wright among them, have written about Butts as a creator of a mythical world, an England, for example, that has never really existed. They focus on her interest in classical mythology, but do not make much reference to the “nuts and bolts” of occult practices which can be found embedded in Butts' work. Her study of magic, her work with Crowley, her working knowledge of such practices do not take centre stage, and it is that which I wish to emphasise. Elements of the magical and mystical permeate all of her works, but some have a particular interest due to their evocation of the occult and the mysteries of specific locations.

Ashe of Rings (1925)

“... once one starts disturbing old things, one raises something one did not know was there to be disturbed ...”⁸⁶

The decision to review this novel in depth was taken because of the position it occupies within the chronology of Mary Butts' work, and because of its subject matter. This was Butts' first published work and was written at the time she was

⁸⁵ The only collected edition of her stories was not published until 2014 in *The Complete Stories* ed Bruce McPherson (New York: McPherson and Company) 2014. This contains all of her previously collected stories in one volume, together with a number of previously uncollected works.

⁸⁶ Mary Butts, *Ashe of Rings and other Writings* (McPherson and Co 1998) p 18

consolidating her aims and intentions regarding the exploration of magic, this being carefully recorded in her diary. It is also the novel in which she refers most explicitly to the practice and power of magic which is echoed by the main themes of the book, and it demonstrates very clearly how Butts chose to communicate her thoughts and beliefs; her elliptical and illusory manner a product of the contemporary modernist movement. The obliqueness of the style causes the reader to have to tease out the meaning of virtually every phrase.

I have determined these main themes of the novel to be: the power of place, the power of women, and the invocation of magic. The further overarching theme which influences the whole novel, is that of a ritualisation of events and objects within “real” life. It must be said however, that as this is a modernist novel, the real life it portrays is considerably distorted. It is also a reaction to the enormous upheaval of the First World War, a raw and bitter memory for many at the time of publication.

Mary Butts herself throws considerable light on the background to the writing of this novel, much later (in 1933), she wrote an “Afterword” setting it firmly in the context of the immediate post-war period.

One sees what it is – a fairy story, a War-fairy-tale, occasioned by the way life was presented to the imaginative children of my generation...Some very curious things went on in London and elsewhere about that time; a tension of life and a sense of living in at least two worlds at once. Though it may be hard to believe now that respectable young women practised evil witchcraft. Or that, apart from the chances of battle, young men felt themselves devoted to death. Yet they did. Or even that other women, though this perhaps was more common, remembered their antique priestesshood of life.⁸⁷

The protagonists therefore perform a particular ritualised function within the story. They are Anthony Ashe, who at the beginning decides that as he needs an heir to his estate, Rings, he must take a wife from the surrounding villages. The main condition is that she be strong healthy and fertile. He himself is no longer young, he believes he will die relatively soon, and that his young widow can go on to have an independent life. His wife Melitta gives birth to the girl Vanna, who grows up to be

⁸⁷ *Ashe of Rings* p 232

the true spiritual heir to the estate. Shortly after she is widowed, she also gives birth to Valentine, but he is the product of an adulterous relationship with a neighbour; he nevertheless bears the name of Ashe and becomes the legitimate heir. The other main characters are Clavell, the butler who is the repository of many of the occult secrets of Rings, Peter Amburton a shell-shocked soldier from the neighbouring estate, Serge, a Russian émigré hiding out from the War, and Judy, a friend of Vanna's from London, who is the antithesis to Vanna; in the context of the novel, the black witch to her white.

The place of power is the eponymous estate occupied by the Ashe family, Rings, set in its cup of turf and beautifully evoked by Butts. Here she draws on her passionate attachment to her own childhood home, Salterns. A description of Salterns in her poem "*Corfe*" is also a description of Rings:

Corfe, the hub of a wheel
Where the green down-spokes turning
Embrace an earth-cup of smoke and ghosts and stone.
The sea orchestrates
The still dance in the cup
Danced forever, the same intricate sobriety
Equivocal, adored⁸⁸

Butts has gifted the house a history full of myth and magic; it is linked to the Arthurian legends and also, even further back, to a prehistoric past, when its nearby stone circle, the Rings that give the house its name, was used for ritual purposes:

It is said of this place that in the time of Arthur ... Morgan le Fay, an enchantress of that period, had dealings of an inconceivable nature there. Also that it was used by Druid priests, and even before their era, as a place for holy and magical rites.⁸⁹

Later in the novel, Vanna tries to explain the role of the Rings in the mystical history of the house and its family:

⁸⁸ Mary Butts *Corfe* 1930

⁸⁹ *Ashe of Rings* P 6

I know when that place of earth-works and trees, a place to picnic in and archaeologise about, turns into a place of more than animal life, real by itself, without any reference to us ... we're servants of the Rings.⁹⁰

This role of “servant” is one that is filled by Vanna herself in her endeavours to protect the sanctity of Rings, and also by Clavel the mysterious butler, a keeper of secrets.

We see that the house is haunted by a more recent past as well; the period in which it has been occupied by the Ashe family has left a strong mark. Among these ancestors was Ursula, the first woman of power associated with the house, “There [in the library] Ursula has declared herself a witch. There, there appeared at uncertain times a sphere of pure light.”⁹¹ Anthony tells his new bride, “You spoke of Ursula – she was earlier [in the house’s history]. It was she who brought into prominence the practice of magic to which our family has always been liable.”⁹²

Ursula wrote her own magical texts about which Anthony sometimes dreams, “Part is in reference to an occult book, the Enchiridion of a Pope ... Then a section in cipher which, so far, no one has read.”⁹³ Ursula’s son did not share his mother’s interests:

Her son destroyed her portrait. He was on Cromwell’s side. He saw on his bedroom door a curse *because of the whoredoms of thy mother Jezebel and her witchcrafts*. He cut off his hair, turned the gilt chapel her Italians had built her to celebrate the black mass into a still room⁹⁴

Another member of the family was executed within the grounds of Rings, apparently by his own tenants, “... they crucified him – or rather they nailed him onto the wall. He died looking on the sea.”⁹⁵ This shows the unmistakable influence of James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* – which Butts is known to have read and been influenced by – in its depiction of a ritualised murder/sacrifice of the head of the family: The “king, as it were.

⁹⁰ *Ashe of Rings* P 169

⁹¹ *Ashe of Rings* p 9

⁹² *Ashe of Rings* p12

⁹³ *Ashe of Rings* P 13

⁹⁴ *Ashe of Rings* p 13

⁹⁵ *Ashe of Rings* p19

Having instructed Melitta, the new bride, in the mysteries of the past, Anthony conducts an intensely ritualised courtship and marriage. He acknowledges the power that women hold by telling her that she is connected to “a great goddess – the type of all things which a woman is or may become.”⁹⁶

The birth of their child, Vanna, is both ritualised and filled with portents. Both Melitta and the child have important roles to fulfil, linked to the sacred stones, “ ... you are my wife – and your life is bound up with the life on that hill. Your child’s life will be bound up with a life outside your own ... I will take you up there ... Ursula Ashe was carried up there to be delivered of her children.”⁹⁷

Anthony presides over an extraordinary naming ceremony for his child. The importance on everyday objects transformed and given ritual significance is a recurring theme in Butts’ works:

In the library [where we know that strange events have occurred from time to time], on a slab of blue marble, stood a winnow-corb of wicker, black with age. Tied on it by wool threads were dried ears of corn, figs and fircones, dolls’cups and cylinders of baked clay ... The nurse unwound the child and laid her naked in the basket ... Anthony lit a tall candle and placed it at the baby’s head. Melitta on the right laid a jar of fresh earth, and a bowl of water on the left. ... “Earth and water and fire”, he said. “They are all around her ... Vanna Elizabeth, daughter of Melitta, bird of Rings! The elements composed you, the elements surround you; so may their harmonious properties sustain you.”⁹⁸

Vanna the mystical child, grows up fully aware of the mysteries of the house, and she responds to them. She comes to believe that she has a great responsibility in ensuring that the spirit of the house and its surrounding landscape is properly respected. While she grows up, the responsibility for the occult protection of Rings is in the hands of Clavel, the butler:

His quiet rites were the funeral games of Anthony Ashe. The grave servant in his meditation first saw Rings as a temple built round a barrow of the dead. In

⁹⁶ *Ashe of Rings* P14

⁹⁷ *Ashe of Rings* P 16

⁹⁸ *Ashe of Rings* P 22

his seven years contemplation he penetrated so far as to forget. What he learned he did not tell. Objectively he was servant to the children of the house: but it is to be doubted if anyone since Ursula Ashe knew more than he.⁹⁹

Clavel fulfils the role of guardian of the sacred place; the keeper of the grail. His protection is quite passive however, and he is unable, like his predecessor, the Fisher King, to intervene in the ritual games taking place. In keeping with this role he protects the ritual objects that have been invested with so much power,” There had been a great night when Melitta had tried to burn the winnow-corb in which Van had been christened. Clavel had walked in and snatched it off the fire.”¹⁰⁰

This responsibility to Rings is not shared by her mother Melitta, who begins a liaison with a neighbour, and commits a sacrilegious act of adultery within the stone circle, which results in the birth of Valentine. This child supplants Vanna as the true heir to Rings; the princess has been cheated out of her birthright by her usurping brother, abetted by her own mother in this fairy tale world¹⁰¹. She has perverted the natural order, according to Vanna, “The woman my father married is stronger than Rings. A bastard will have it. We may call him that.... She has profaned our sanctities, and it has not hurt her.”¹⁰² Vanna’s own connection to Rings is profound as she understands its unique qualities,” It’s a peculiar place. You get out of it what you put in. The same as with everything else, only more intensely. That it is the first rule of magic, as you ought to know.” ¹⁰³

The sanctities are also profaned by Judy, Vanna’s friend and destructive opposite who although she has no claim to Rings, wants to control its power. Her own use of magic is shown to be violent and sexualised. In an act which echoes Butts’ own mystical blood ritual with Cecil Maitland, she and Serge “celebrate” their union:

She ran at him and bit his wrist. He threw her down and held her there. His blood smeared her face and her sleeve She slipped onto the floor... He walked along the dark passage, opened the outer door and looked back. She

⁹⁹ *Ashe of Rings* P 53

¹⁰⁰ *Ashe of Rings* P 168

¹⁰¹ As described by MB in the Afterword to the published novel.

¹⁰² *Ashe of Rings* P 71

¹⁰³ *Ashe of Rings* P86

was still on the floor, sucking the blood from her sleeve, evoking an evil spirit.¹⁰⁴

This grotesque ritual sets in motion a series of actions by which the true and false heirs to Rings challenge each other for possession of the magic that can be found there. Vanna alone understands the difference between appropriate and inappropriate use of ritual, and how ritual can be perverted and become sacrilege, a preoccupation of Mary Butts herself. Vanna talks to Serge about the relationship he has with Judy, "... she has drawn your blood, and blood is the life. Mix it and you mix souls. A very silly ritual: she's opened a vein in you, a leak in the body of the world's peace. The infernal powers are loose, in a place of evocation."¹⁰⁵ Vanna refers to Judy and Serge as, "amateur invocators ... we are like rival magicians."¹⁰⁶

The acts of sacrilege reach their climax with a sacrifice carried out by Judy, the dark witch, and her other partner in the quest for the power of Rings, Peter Amburton, who is useful to her because he has grown up in proximity to Rings. The stone circle is polluted by this couple, "We've found out all about your filthy, mystery-mongering place. It drinks blood. Give it a drink and it works. We've given it a drink ... [w]e've given it Peter's dog. There's lots of blood in an Airedale."¹⁰⁷ This pollution of the sacred site is paralleled by Vanna's actions to propitiate the spirit of place. In a spell-like speech she tells the uncomprehending Serge, "The thorn is the Ashe tree. The ash is the tree of life; Patter, patter, it's the were-wolves' night gallop. The tree will work it for us. Oak, ash and thorn."¹⁰⁸ Vanna pays homage to the Rings with an impassioned pagan dance:

She flung back her head, straining her neck.... She snapped her fingers and stamped the earth, the pink heels rabbit-thudding. Her eyes were on the ground, or lifted up under the leaf-inlaid sky. She pirouetted and rolled in the blue flowers, snapping their stalks, their sap webbing her hands. She bounded up, and ran up the high wood to the barrow and plumped face down

¹⁰⁴ *Ashe of Rings* p80

¹⁰⁵ *Ashe of Rings* pp 95-96

¹⁰⁶ *Ashe of Rings* p187

¹⁰⁷ *Ashe of Rings* P186

¹⁰⁸ *Ashe of Rings* p150

on a thyme patch, her soles in the air.... I have danced, I have danced. I have set my stage.¹⁰⁹

The novel reaches its climax with a drawing together of the themes outlined above. The magical protagonists are women, Vanna and Judy, the setting for their confrontation is the circle of Rings, and they each create their own ritual tools to carry out their intentions. Vanna in a symbol of sacrifice, “...lay back on the stone and opened her palms to the moon.”¹¹⁰ This being done to counteract, “The dog’s blood turning into a white poison and moving the stone.”¹¹¹ To achieve mastery over both Vanna and her inheritance, Judy encourages Peter to “do what he likes”¹¹² to her (that is, rape her), but he refuses after seeing Vanna spread out ritualistically on the stone, and Judy knows that her powers are waning, she is unable to penetrate the “cradle of Rings”¹¹³ that Vanna occupies. Judy creeps away ignominiously while Vanna is exultant, “The house is laughing. I am beautiful. I have the Rings to play with. I have power. I have done better than I understand. Magnificat.”¹¹⁴

It is possible to take issue with Butts’ writing at this climatic point in the novel. Judy despite her witch-like concentration on her quest to win the power of Rings, creeps away with barely a whimper. Her fate is left to be described by Serge:

I knew it would do that to her. It is so strong. Sucked her up, and left her under the window, a little heap of white bones. Dead a hundred years. Little bones and rags stirring in the draught. Dead red rags of hair¹¹⁵

She has in this vision, been reduced to a collection of fetishistic objects.

There is what appears to me to be a particularly revealing passage where Vanna seems to speak with the voice of the author. In answer to the question, “What is your theory about the Rings?”, she replies:

By the living soul in all of us, I don’t know. I feel power, movement, a pattern. It goes and comes – my being able to think about it, I mean. No one can think

¹⁰⁹ *Ashe of Rings* P153 -154

¹¹⁰ *Ashe of Rings* P188

¹¹¹ *Ashe of Rings* P189

¹¹² *Ashe of Rings* P188

¹¹³ *Ashe of Rings* P189

¹¹⁴ *Ashe of Rings* P196

¹¹⁵ *Ashe of Rings* P255

about such things all the time. It is magic, whatever magic is; and magic is not a metier.¹¹⁶

By this statement Butts is implying, I believe, that magic – at least her understanding of magic – is not something that can be learnt in the manner of a trade or skill. It illustrated her intuitive approach, and her reliance on feelings rather than intellect. It also explains why she found it so difficult to describe what she was experiencing, whether directly in her diary or through the characters in her fiction.

This magical power is channelled through the women in the novel. They fill the role of priestess/witch and act as mediators between the worlds, instigators of rituals and catalysts for magical transformations. The place, that is Rings, is both the source and magnet for these magical transactions. The novel is an account of the struggle between those who truly understand this power, and those who abuse and misuse it. Although the characters do venture out into the “real” world of London, they are always drawn back to the place of power.

Armed with Madness (1928)

Mary Butts' second novel was published in 1928, after her period of magical instruction with Crowley was over, and during a rather unstable period in her life when drugs had a particular hold on her and her circle. Although written ten years after the end of the war, the book is, as *Ashe of Rings* had been, imbued with the influence of the recent conflict. Butts, very near the beginning of the book, gives us a paragraph which both provides a context for the events to follow, and gives us an insight into her own mind set at this time:

... everywhere there was a sense of broken continuity, a dis-ease. The end of an age, the beginning of another ... Discovery of a new value, a different way of apprehending everything. She wished the earth would not suddenly look fragile, as if it was going to start shuffling about... There was something wrong with all them, or with their world ...Shove it off on the war, but that did not help.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ *Ashe of Rings* P 169

¹¹⁷ Mary Butts, *Armed with Madness* in *The Taverner Novels* (McPherson and Co) 1992 p9

This novel draws much more obviously on Butts' interest in classical myth. As Resto Foy concludes "Myth offered many modernists a way to create some order within the chaos of their world."¹¹⁸ This she had in common with other contemporary writers such as Joyce and TS Eliot, in fact this novel is Butts' reinterpretation of the Grail legend as was Eliot's *The Wasteland*. The common themes which link this work to *Ashe of Rings* are again, the spirit of a particular place, the power of women, and the importance of ritual. As in the earlier work, the protagonists all have a ritual role in the events and are engaged in enacting this ritual within their everyday lives. The grail "game" which they enact involves a cup, a dried-up well and a spear; all objects retrieved from the natural world around them, all associated with the traditional legend and all imbued with Freudian symbolism. Ritual for this group of characters is both a means of connecting with nature and a way in which they can find meaning in an alien world. "... because society has been uprooted, dislocated. Armed with the madness of that world, they become caught in a dream world of unreason and illusion and retreat into their own rituals and quests as a kind of revenge on the world they choose not to confront"¹¹⁹

The novel is (as so much of her fiction), hallucinatory and suggestive and often oblique; rarely does she simply tell the reader what is actually happening. She describes the events and moves with what Paul West in his introduction to the standard edition of the book calls her "peremptoriness", which as he says has caused problems for the reader:

Some would think her rather dotty, even on the strength of this peremptoriness joined to her weirdo subject matter; but she was only trying to get across her private sense of the universe ...¹²⁰

It is a rather grudging endorsement but it reflects the conventional view of Mary Butts' body of work which acknowledges the difficulties associated with her subject matter.

The novel opens in a way that is very reminiscent of *Ashe of Rings*, with a description of a house and its setting; the sense of enclosure is the same. The

¹¹⁸ Resto Foy, *Ritual* p 52

¹¹⁹ Resto Foy, *Ritual* p 62

¹²⁰ Paul West, Preface to *The Taverner Novels* p ix

houses are also very similar, and both clearly draw on her own childhood home in Dorset. This house is in Cornwall, close to the sea and surrounded by a wood which is treated as a living entity:

The sea lay three parts round the house, invisible because of the wood. The wood rose from its cliff-point to a single tree, and spread out inland, in a fan to enclose the house ... The people who had the house were interested in the wood and its silence. When it got worse, after dark or at midday, they said it was tuning-up ... A large gramophone stood with its mouth open on the veranda flags. They had been playing to the wood after lunch, to appease it and to keep their dancing in hand.¹²¹

The house and its surroundings, like *Rings*, has an ancient history, "... this country was given its first human character in the late stone-age. That's all the earth-works and barrows you see." ¹²² This establishing of a landscape's credentials was important for Butts; for her, in all her work, the present is strongly affected by the past, whether rural England or urban Paris.

The sense of enclosure gives the characters the freedom to practise their rituals and to indulge their particular preoccupations whether they be artistic, sexual or mystical. They each have a specific ritual significance, which again echoes *Ashe of Rings*, and as in the earlier work, there is a strong element of the fairy tale with its tropes of the good and the wicked, the magical place and the bonds between brothers and sisters.

A brother and sister to whom the house belonged [Felix and Drusilla] and a young man [Ross] they had known for a long time. They called her Scylla from her name, Drusilla, altering it because they said she was sometimes a witch and sometimes a bitch ... they became a triple figure, like Hecate the witch, amused, imaginative. They put on their things: Felix's pretty clothes, Ross's rough ones, the girl, her delicate strong dress. With their arms around her shoulders, they crossed the rocks and went up the cliff path, and through the wood to the house.¹²³

¹²¹ Mary Butts, *Armed With Madness* included in *The Taverner Novels* (McPherson and Co 1992)p 3

¹²² *Armed with Madness* p 13

¹²³ *Armed with Madness* p 5/6

This powerful tripartite relationship is therefore primed for the intrusion of other characters and disturbances to the status quo and a ritualised, sexual game begins. Carston, the outsider American and “Picus”, who seems to have arrived from another dimension altogether, “... his colour drawn from the moon’s palette ... cooled to winter in the dark crystal eyes.”¹²⁴ A discovery is made, that of an “old cup”, retrieved from a well, and featuring “Keltic twiddles”. To add to the mythical significance, it is fished out of the well using a spear; the cup “[m]ight have been made from star-material.”¹²⁵ The group immediately equate this object with the Sanc-Grail; the conjunction of the cup and the spear have conjured up the ancient magic. In a comment which encapsulates much of Mary Butts’ own philosophy, Scylla says “... that odd things were always happening and old patterns repeated themselves.”¹²⁶ The idea of strange things always happening, past events repeating themselves, and the creation of pattern from apparently random events are found extensively in Butts’ work. These ideas together with the acceptance that certain places become imbued with particular power, are at the core of her work.

The purpose of this re-enactment of the grail myth, is to restore order to lives fractured by their experience of war and its aftermath. As Scylla muses, “There was something in their lives spoiled and inconclusive like the grail story.”¹²⁷ There is an obsessive quality to the character’s actions, which they eventually recognise themselves and attempt to break out of the house’s influence which all are finding claustrophobic. Felix flees to Paris and the bohemian life, characterised by drugs, drink and casual but intense sexual encounters. His sister goes to London and an excruciatingly awkward meeting with old friends; both find these attempts to break out unsatisfactory and are forced to return to the confines of their ancient estate and its magic. These all contribute to the sense that there is something fractured and out of step about society; a lack of balance which only ancient ritual is able to restore.

The novel concludes with an extraordinary incident in which the sacrifice of Scylla is attempted. She is tied to a statue of Picus, made out of clay and feathers, and arrows are fired at her in an apparent reference to the martyrdom of St Sebastian. This attempted sacrifice is to propitiate ... what exactly? It appears to be the climax

¹²⁴ *Armed with Madness* p 14

¹²⁵ *Armed with Madness* p 17

¹²⁶ *Armed with Madness* 16

¹²⁷ *Armed with Madness* p 67

to the sexual game, where the male characters have virtually all at some point regarded Scylla as a potential mate. Her choice of Picus has inflamed Clarence, a neighbour, beyond the point of reason. This madness is seemingly the result of the unearthing of the grail, a madness which flourishes in the feverish atmosphere conjured up in the ancient landscape. The characters' inability to function effectively in the outside world has led to them to a form of mania, focussed on their discovery, "Armed with a magic madness as their only shield from the insanity of the outside world, the grail knights seek an answer to the origin of the cup."¹²⁸

This novel is an oddity, and little read today. It is clearly a product of its time, as of course, was all of Butts' work, but this in particular is informed by the state of post-war society, the "dis-ease" as she calls it. The prose is difficult and allusory, seldom straightforward. It reads like a text requiring a key, and that key is the understanding of Butts' worldview and sense of mystery: she does not intend to make it easy for the reader. The world within the novel is mirrored by her own world and both are equally difficult for the uninitiated to enter. Butts has no interest in going out of her way to educate and enlighten the reader – they have to work for that privilege.

The Stories (various dates)

The short stories are the most accessible of Butts' works. Most were written after the time she spent in intense magical practice, and after her return to live in England, and therefore are reflective in tone and subject matter. She had, it appears, meditated on her experiences and consolidated the recurring themes into these stories. The language is still allusive, hinting at occult meanings, but the shorter length concentrates these ideas both on the page and in the mind of the reader. Her most successful stories concern themselves with all of her key ideas; the significance of ritual, the search for patterns, the existence of multiple dimensions. Moreover, because they were written after her period of study with Crowley and her subsequent breakdown, they also explore the effect on individuals that an intense interest in magic can have. We can also find a contrast between what might be termed her urban fiction, and the work set in the countryside which reflected her own early years (and to which she eventually returned). The latter reflects a more natural type of activity, something much closer to the practice of village magic than ritual

¹²⁸ *Armed with Madness* p 67

magic but in her “urban” stories, primarily those which are set in Paris, and which delve deep in to the mythology of that city, ritual magic is very much to the fore. The significance of *place* and the way in which certain locations are imprinted with the past is, as it is throughout her work, of critical importance.

Her story *From Altar to Chimneypiece*, first published posthumously in *Last Stories* (1938), is critical to understanding Butts’ views on the varieties of magic being practiced in Paris and therefore the types of sects that flourished there between the wars. Her reflections regarding Crowley’s practices after leaving Thelema, are also an important influence on this story.

The protagonist makes clear his attachment to Paris – not just the observable Paris, but the many layers lying beneath, a theme that recurs in her work. Before disillusionment sets in, the character, Vincent was:

... exquisitely in love with Paris, his sweet profound Paris.

Great Paris –

Where the sights are –

And the nights are –

And the lights are.¹²⁹

Like many of her other protagonists, the character Vincent, lives a semi-rootless existence, searching for meaning in a life which has been devastated by the recent war:

He found a quarter in a princess of cities where people were being good because they were being happy, because after the lost years, a small tide of earthly joy was rising gently in that place. Or winding in and out were beginning to live again, beginning to make up for the years the War had taken.¹³⁰

Although Butts writes of the happiness and relief occasioned by the end of the war, she recognises that there is another side that needs to be acknowledged; that some of the inhabitants of this city, those who were unaffected by (and perhaps even profiting from) the recent upheaval in Europe, are searching only for sensation, “...

¹²⁹ Natalie Blondel ed., *With and Without Buttons* (Carcanet 1991) p158 “*From Altar to Chimneypiece*”

¹³⁰ *Buttons* p160

the men and women whose hell had not been occasioned by any dislocation of our society, but by the putrid state of their sub conscious selves, occasioned by fear, by over-indulgence ...”¹³¹ It would appear that Butts’ own experiences with Aleister Crowley and his followers and hangers-on had coloured her views of those who looked for new experiences. Rather than the search for spiritual enlightenment, her Parisian hedonists looked to indulge their baser natures and corrupt those innocents who cross their paths. Paris was the place where these experiences could be found; its many layered past and the liminality to which Butts often refers, confer a special status on the city – which we will see is held to be sacred to Isis and full of magic and witchcraft. Butts makes reference to the “magic maps” of the city (as she also does in the story *Mappa Mundi*), used to record this “other” Paris, and these maps reveal the past as well as the present:

Paris is propitious for this making of magic maps... Vincent ... found out ... That the hillside across the river from the Tour St Jacques to the top of the Rue de Cardinal Lemoine¹³² is still given over to witchcraft, a winding stream of passionate and infernal air, in and out of the old Latin Quarter.¹³³

And again:

At the end of the still noble part of a noble street, on the edge of the space in his map coloured “witchcraft”, it stands close to the river at its most adorable strip – the Quai Voltaire ... At any moment he could get up and go for an enchanting walk, with, a few yards off as he crossed his sorcerer’s line, hint of danger about it. A delicious sense of walking into the part of a town which was literally supernatural, charged with it, a charge put in during a part of the Middle Ages, too strong to wear off.¹³⁴

The city had the apparent ability of communicating on multiple levels with certain, more empathetic individuals, such as Butts herself, as much as her protagonist, seems to have been well attuned to the city’s voice. This is well described by Marie-Claire Bancquart in her study *Paris des Surrealistes*:

¹³¹ *Buttons* p160

¹³² Rue Cardinal Lemoine also features in Butts’ diaries as a place of magical significance. In the Twenties it was once the home of Ernest Hemingway.

¹³³ *Buttons* p 160/161

¹³⁴ *Buttons* p 165

Ainsi se crée une participation de tous les instants, pour l'écrivain sensible à la présence de la magie citadine. Il est dans Paris des "nœuds" plus vibrantes de communication, où l'énergie cachée se révèle mieux qu'ailleurs à celui qui la sollicite.¹³⁵

The recurrent trope is of liminality, that is a state of existence on both sides of a threshold, specifically in Butts' stories, the border between reality and the supernatural, the present and the past. She describes the many layers of the city, a place where we are separated by only one dimension, that of time, from all of the remarkable events of the past. Butts is aware of the thin line that separates us from these events, and of how that line can be crossed by those who open their minds. There are particular groups of people however, who inhabit this border-land and who exploit it for their own ends:

Between Montparnasse and the Boulevard St Germain, the tide-line between the rest of the city and his magical strip, there lived an old woman of some consequence, in herself like a received and accepted and perfectly reputable witch. A local sorceress ... her spells were composed with the help of the English language used as if it had never been used before."¹³⁶

Among the group associated with this old woman, is Blaise Boissevain, a character clearly based on Crowley and illustrating Butts' views following the disillusionment she experienced after her time at Cefalu, "His young women usually die one way or another. And, as happens, his gifts are remarkable. He quite openly practices spells, some based on a desecration of the Host. And they work."¹³⁷ Butts is here referencing some of the activities that she saw at the Abbey of Thelema, for example during the "Cakes of Light" ritual. The apparent desecration of the Host serves for Butts as a symbol of the way in which even the most powerful ritual objects lose their power when treated inappropriately. Butts refers to the unusual ornaments on display in the apartment of the mysterious Frenchwoman who is clearly an acquaintance of Blaise Boissevain:

¹³⁵ Marie-Claire Bancquart, *Paris des Surréalistes* (Paris: Seghers 1972)p 13[Thus the participation of all times is created, for the writer sensitive to the magic of the city. The most vibrant "knots" of communication are in Paris where hidden energy reveals itself better than elsewhere to those who seek it out.]

¹³⁶ *Buttons* p 170

¹³⁷ *Buttons* p178

It was clear now what they were: they were frames, supports, stands for the box – in this case a round of hollow glass, fixed onto the disk – to hold the wafers of the Host. The box now taken away, they now made delightful chimney-piece ornaments... She picked up one and began to rub it on a filthy handkerchief of khaki cotton, on which she spat.¹³⁸

These formerly sacred objects have been degraded from their position on the altar to mere curiosities on the chimney-piece. Resto Foy makes the point that, “Here Butts’ concerns for spirituality and its deterioration into degradation and profanity reach their culmination. Ritual has been desecrated, desacrified by those who play at magic [as Butts was herself accused of doing by Crowley], black magic, but without a true understanding of spiritual connections.”¹³⁹ The filthy handkerchief and spitting are surely a gratuitous insult on the part of an evidently cultured woman and as such worthy of Crowley himself. But it should be noted that Butts herself was willing to acknowledge that even though she may have come to deplore these practices, they were effective.

A second story set in Paris, *Mappa Mundi* is less specifically about the cults that flourished in the city between the wars, and much more about the magical essence of the city itself, a place where the boundaries between natural and supernatural are blurred and a kind of liminal state exists in which the unwary can be trapped. The story concerns the fate of a young American tourist drawn helplessly across these boundaries, and she once again refers to the desecration of the sacred, in this story, specifically Christian churches:

He [the young American] did not know ... that along the line of my three glorious streets was once the waste place where the witches met – quartier des Sorciers; that when it was known what had happened in the little church by the river, the judge ordered a cloth to be hung over the crucifix, in sign that man if he could, would spare God the knowledge of what had been done there ...”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ *Buttons* p183

¹³⁹ Resto Foy, *Ritual, Myth and Mysticism* p 107

¹⁴⁰ *Buttons* p193

An important element in this story is the tradition that the city was in one of its earliest incarnations, sacred to the goddess Isis, and that connection could still be felt by those with enough perception, indeed the worship of Isis still continued as will be seen:

Like all the great feminine places, behind its first dazzling free display, you come quickly upon profound reserves. After the spree a veil is drawn, a sober *noli me tangere* veil. Isis, whose face on a first swift initiation you think you have seen, even to the colour of her eyes, Isis you believe you have kissed, withdraws, well wrapped-up, grown instantly to her own height – as is the property of a goddess.¹⁴¹

This traditional association with Isis had existed since the Roman occupation of Gaul, and cult objects had periodically been unearthed since then in the environs of the city. It was said that the very name of the city was derived from that of the goddess; Paria/Pharia Isis – the lighthouse of Isis. This is in fact linguistically incorrect –the derivation being from the name of the tribe of the Parisii who occupied the site of the city in pre-Roman times. The more mystical derivation however, was popular, for obvious reasons, among those who had an interest in an occult origin for the name.

Les Parisiens avaient reçu leur nom de PARIA ISIS, pour raison du culte de cette déesse, qu'ils avaient introduit, en la Région avoisinante la rivière de la Seine.. ¹⁴²

Mary Butts was very much aware of the influence of the goddess, which she understood to have continued into the twentieth century, layered beneath the trappings of the modern city. In February 1900, The *Humanitarian* magazine published an account of the Isis cult presided over by the founder of the Golden Dawn, S. MacGregor Mathers and his wife (at this time calling themselves the Count and Countess MacGregor). They did not directly link this iteration of Isis worship with the ancient tradition that existed specifically in Paris, MacGregor saying, “During our

¹⁴¹ Butts p188

¹⁴² Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Les Perspectives dépravées: Tome 3: La Quête d'Isis* (Flammarion Champs art 1997) p 113 [The Parisians derived their name from Paria Isis, due to the cult of this goddess, which they had introduced into the region neighbouring the river Seine...]

studies of the Egyptian religion we obtained certain lost truths, in possession of which we became converts to Isis."¹⁴³ These truths were apparently delivered by visions of the Hierophant Rameses and the High Priestess Anat (in fact the Mathers themselves). Mary Butts however, made that link with the past.

The contemporary researches of Pierre Geyraud¹⁴⁴ show that Isis worship continued in the years between the wars, and Butts stressed the continuity of the practice. Geyraud was a journalist, novelist, poet and ex-priest who in the inter-war period conducted a series of investigations and interviews with members of the small sects and groups which apparently flourished in Paris at the time when Mary Butts was living there. Several of these groups were of Christians who would have been regarded as heretical by the Catholic church, but others were practitioners of ritual magic, communicators with other worlds, and worshippers of pagan gods and goddesses.

Geyraud described and interviewed the members of a cult dedicated to Isis in the 1930s, though he and they were well aware of the Isis worship that had existed in earlier times:

A la fin du siècle dernier, la Revue des Deux mondes¹⁴⁵ apporta de pathétiques révélations sur la doctrine et les rites d'Isiaques parisiens. M. Gilbert-Augustin Thierry, dans le Masque, synthétisa le réveil à Paris des antiques mystères... Plus récemment, des rénovateurs du culte d'Isis se rassemblaient chez l'un d'eux, à Montmartre. C'étaient en général des gens de haute culture...¹⁴⁶

This group were well aware of the role of Isis in Parisian history, and the influence that she supposedly continued to exert. The leader of the group revealed to him the great secret:

¹⁴³ www.golden-dawn.com Isis worship in Paris

¹⁴⁴ Pierre Geyraud (real name Raoul Guyader) his dates are obscure; he possibly died in the early 1960s. His works include *Parmi les Sectes et les Rites*, *Les Religions Nouvelles de Paris* (1939), *Les Sociétés secrètes de Paris* (1938), *Les Petites Eglises de Paris* (1937).

¹⁴⁵ This journal is still published today.

¹⁴⁶ Pierre Geyraud, *Les Religions Nouvelles de Paris* (Paris: Emile-Paul Freres 1937) p 152 [At the end of the last century, the *Revue des Deux Mondes* provided moving revelations concerning the doctrines and rites of Isis worshippers in Paris. M Thierry, in the *Masque*, synthesised the revival in Paris of the ancient mysteries. More recently, the revivers of the cult of Isis assembled at the home of one of their group in Montmartre. In general, they were people of high culture.]

... la Barque d'Isis porte toujours les destinées du monde. Sous la cathédrale Notre-Dame existe encore aujourd'hui une crypte sacrée, contemporaine de l'antique temple isiaque. Elle est cachée, sans entrée et absolument inaccessible aux corps physiques. Et dans cette crypte qu'aux graves moments de l'histoire, le Maître Inconnu chargé de l'évolution spirituelle en Europe réunit ses serviteurs pour leur indiquer les décisions d'En-Haut et les dispositions qui s'imposent. Les collaborateurs du Maître se rendent donc dans la crypte, après un dédoublement¹⁴⁷ qui, dégagant l'astral, laissée chez eux, à la surface, leurs corps physique. ¹⁴⁸

The city had many sensation seekers, determined to make up for the time lost in the War, but those more serious, such as the members of this cult of Isis, who were genuinely seeking enlightenment, could turn to these supposedly old beliefs and practices. Mary Butts' description could well be applied to them:

... you find that there are other [experiences], possibilities of thrilling ways of life that do not depend on wealth or sex or the excitements between midnight and dawn; vistas of well-being that touch the commonest acts within the service of the Goddess and her law...¹⁴⁹

Butts' story reflects the beliefs of the cult of Isis, in that it deals with a mysterious separation between the physical and the supernatural. In the same way that a hidden entrance to the sacred space is inaccessible to the physical body, *Mappa Mundi* deals with an alternative reality behind the physical Paris which can be accessed by those who have sufficient enlightenment. In the story however, this can lead to the body disappearing into this other world, unable to find its way back. This is a sinister world peopled by disturbing dream-like visions. The unnamed protagonist is fully attuned to the mysteries of Paris, and tries to use his wisdom to

¹⁴⁷ This expression was used by other practitioners of astral travel to describe the process of separation of mind and body, leaving the spirit free to travel.

¹⁴⁸ Geyraud, *Les Religions Nouvelles* p 156/7 [... the Barque of Isis still carries the destinies of the world. Under the cathedral of Notre-dame, there still exists today a sacred crypt, contemporary with the ancient temple of Isis. It is hidden, without an entrance, and completely inaccessible to the physical body. And in this crypt, only at the important moments in history, the Unknown Master reunites his servants to indicate to them the decisions of the Most High, and the arrangements which he imposes. The Master's collaborators give themselves up in this way in the crypt, after a splitting into two which sets free the astral, leaving on the surface, their physical bodies.]

¹⁴⁹ *Butts* p188

help the innocent American he befriends. This innocent abroad is both fascinated and bemused by his experiences:

Have you ever thought what lies behind this city – above all behind the ancient part we're sitting looking at? What if you go at it long enough, comes **out**, what you walk into when you're awake and when you're asleep?¹⁵⁰

He, the young American, is one of those who crosses the border between dimensions almost unwittingly; the narrator is far more circumspect. The innocent is, "[s]wept up, hurried off into an extension of that knowledge we both shared. Only an extension I had the sense to keep out of or the inability to pursue." Something far more deeply interfused." That was it. So far that he would never return.¹⁵¹

Butts draws on her own experiences of astral journeys to describe the surreal quality of the "other" Paris:

Do you know the white cliffs with the poplars and the fountains, east of the city near the old fortifications? ... No-one to speak to – just a few lovely quiet people about on their own blessed business. All Edens man's been working on. But what are the great birds?¹⁵²

Astral projection in order to connect with the other-worlds beyond this one had always been a favoured technique of Butts, and one that led to conflict with Crowley as she realised she could undertake this very successfully without his help. She understood that certain skills and discipline were required, and in this story she illustrates the dangers that occur when someone without those skills stumbles into the astral world. The innocent American disappears without trace; unable to return to the present, and the narrator is left behind, appealing to the Goddess for protection, "Goddess, said I, keep an eye on your servants."¹⁵³

An earlier story *The Golden Bough*, also makes reference to the birds flying in the other-worldly sky. It also shows how in Butts' world, profound mystical experiences could be summoned using very prosaic means:

¹⁵⁰ Butts 190

¹⁵¹ Butts p198

¹⁵² Butts p192

¹⁵³ Butts p200

I'll tell you a thing. One does not see half of what is happening around one. There's a trick though, by which you can. Bang a door at midnight. You'll hear the noise break up the quiet and let something through. Pull up the bathroom plug at the same hour. Go through quick into a dark room to the window. You'll see skeleton birds crossing the white sky.¹⁵⁴

As Butts well knew, it is not simply the act of making a noise that frees the senses; it is the all-important *Will* of the protagonist.

In her story *Angèle au Couvent*, the schoolgirl at the heart of the piece escapes from an uncongenial reality by undertaking astral journeys in a way which echo the experience of Vincent in *Mappa Mundi*, and where the classical god Hermes is invoked in the same way as Isis. Terry, the schoolgirl, who is at odds with the constrained world of the convent, enters into a trance state where, "I shall see things in the world where Hermes is, and when I come out these people will leave me alone ... Divine Hermes, don't let me forget you..."¹⁵⁵ This story is set in Scotland however, where Butts herself was sent to boarding school, and where she took refuge in her inner life. Terry makes her own ritual objects from the materials to hand, imbuing them with a special power, "She took out a rosary she had made of nutmegs and peach stones spaced with red beads and finished with a cross..."¹⁵⁶ She carries out her spell-work with this object as a mouse and a gull cross her path, to stress her connection with the natural world.

The improvisation of ritual objects can also be found in *Speed the Plough*, a story which deals with the wounding and subsequent rehabilitation of a soldier of the Great War. He attempts his own form of psychic self-healing using improvised ritual objects:

He found a ritual and a litany. Dressed in vertical black he bore on outstretched arms, huge bales of wound stuffs. With a turn of the wrist he would unwrap them, and they would fall for him rayed like some star.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴Nary Butts, *Collected Stories* ed McPherson (McPherson and Co 2014) p93

¹⁵⁵ *Buttons* p60/61

¹⁵⁶ *Buttons* p 48

¹⁵⁷ *Buttons* p 10

The “rayed star” that he creates is a powerful image from ritual magic, the pentagram, used for example in banishing and invoking rituals where its performance prepares for (and concludes) a session of magical working. This ceremonial posture is suggested by the soldier, robed and with his arms held out wide. In rituals such as this, no other participant is required; this was also true of the meditations and astral journeys that Butts undertook.¹⁵⁸ In *Friendship’s Garland*, she describes this process:

I listened a long time to a song like the noise made by the footfall of a cat, and when I came out of listening to it, I saw the room take fire. Point and point and point that could reflect took light. The low sun covered my face with fire. Outside the leaves were fiery green tongues the great tree had come in and stood on the threshold of my balcony. It did not menace me. It was absolutely silent, but it said: I guard your door. This place is tabu. Keep tabu. When I saw the branches pass in and point at me, I did reverence to the tree and its precinct; and when I could have knelt on the floor in awe of the tree’s sanctity, I saw that it was also myself...¹⁵⁹

The story *With and Without Buttons* is Butts’ most conventional ghost story which takes place in, “[a] tidy little home, with something behind it of monstrous old age ...”¹⁶⁰ In this house, two sisters, almost accidentally, conjure up powerful supernatural forces, their intention being only to fool their sceptical neighbour into believing that such things can exist. They tap into a form of power they did not know they had when they attempt to convince their neighbour Trenchard that his house is haunted:

“Not because we did not like him, but because we wanted to have power over him, the power women sometimes want to have over men, the pure, not erotic, power, whose point is that it shall have nothing to do with sex. We

¹⁵⁸ For example the performance of this ritual was considered very important in the Thelemic Magick described and practised by Aleister Crowley (see his Notes on the Ritual of the Pentagram thelemapedia.org/index.php/lesser_ritual_of_the_Pentagram).

¹⁵⁹ *Buttons* p 24

¹⁶⁰ *Buttons* p88

could have made him make love, to either or both of us, any day of the week.”¹⁶¹

Resto Foy comments that, “[b]y willing a change, the sisters perform a kind of magic. They invoke the powers of their sex, from witches to goddesses, and succeed in proving to Trenchard, and surprisingly themselves, that these forces exist in the real world. It is a will to power ...”¹⁶² The sisters through their will actually conjure up a real ghost, though they do not do this consciously and did not set out to do so. Gloves appear mysteriously throughout Trenchard’s house (both with and without buttons). He falls back on a traditional explanation for this, “What witches’ trick is this?, he cried, and stared at us, for we were women.”¹⁶³ They are indeed women, and they are possessed of an ancient power.

The will to power was of course central to Butts’ own occult aims and an important element in the manifesto she drew up in April 1921. The power achieved by the sisters, without apparent effort, is the power that she herself strove to acquire.

Other texts which merit closer examination, are her essays, one in particular, *Traps for Unbelievers*. This was published in 1932 as a pamphlet produced by Desmond Harmsworth in London, and subsequently republished, in 1998, in the same volume as the standard edition of *Ashe of Rings*.

It is essentially, a reflection on the decline in religious practice, both organised and personal, in contemporary society. This was written some time after her association with Crowley, and the period of living in penury and squalor in Paris and London, and what is particularly noticeable is the somewhat ironic and dispassionate way in which she writes about religion and magic, a tone which is completely different from the one she employs in her diaries. This is the personality that Mary chose to display to the public; the story of her intimate, and not always pleasant, involvement with the world of ritual magic was, at this point in her life, a secret to all but a select few.

The essay is also a meditation on modern society, a society in which material considerations appear to be taking precedence over spiritual needs.

¹⁶¹ *Buttons* p86

¹⁶² Resto Foy, *Ritual* p100

¹⁶³ *Buttons* p 96

Somebody ... said that up to now, mankind had been investing the great part of their spiritual and imaginative energy in church securities, all fundamentally and indissolubly bound up in the personal immortality of the soul, and what was going to happen to it once it had left the body. While for the two or three generations, people who have been asking to see their securities, securities which have been shown to be by no means guilt-edged.¹⁶⁴

But despite this perceived decline in religious practice, Butts' is aware that certain even more ancient beliefs are still present, often lurking behind a far more conventional facade; in other words, she still finds evidence of the type of ritual practices she herself was so devoted to:

People now do not pray for the souls of the dead any more than they pray for their own, but Queen Victoria's rite in the bedroom of the Prince Consort is not quite extinct. I have seen a pair of riding boots, the photograph of a hunter, grouped on the table of a locked study, with two of the horse's hoofs set as inkstands and two as candlesticks. Candlesticks that were lit.¹⁶⁵

The urge to create personal, improvised, but meaningful rituals is impossible to suppress, even though we are given the strong impression that the creator of this particular ritual would be reluctant, even embarrassed, to admit the reason for their creation of such a personal shrine. Sometimes the rituals she describes are much less easy to interpret; the meaning is only apparent to the individual presiding over it:

I have seen a man who was a distinguished soldier making an anagram out of what he thought was the Hebrew word for the Abomination of Desolation, and the name of Lenin, all done in cowrie shells, worked into an imaginative ground-plan of Karnac in Brittany. At least, that is what I think he was doing. He was certainly playing with magic objects, at a kind of personal map-making of the movements of Destiny in unrelated terms.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ *Ashe of Rings* p299-300

¹⁶⁵ *Ashe of Rings* p 304

¹⁶⁶ *Ashe of Rings* p 312

She often uses the very particular magical terms “mana” and “tabu”; both terms loaded with occult meaning for Mary.¹⁶⁷ Rather than employ the term “magic”, often people refer to “luck”, but these concepts can be almost interchangeable. Faith is in decline “except perhaps for pure fetish-worship, which is flourishing.”¹⁶⁸

Luck and its attendant Imps, the charm and the mascot and the fetish up-to-date; the little objects we will not part with, which we feel to be tabu; or else charged-up with mana, as they have always been; the ring that a lover has worn, the medal that a Pope had blessed.¹⁶⁹

This is all evidence of the magic and occult power that can imbue the most mundane of objects; the everyday magic that Butts describes in so many of her works of fiction. The magic does not come from a ritual and is not endorsed by any group or sect, it comes from the individual’s will which is the root of all occult power. Butts feels that the decline of organised religion has left the way open for a revival of sorts, in folk magic. This is a process that, according to her, has occurred throughout history:

Pious exercises to-day in the demonology of all the demons, the folk-spirits each land has invented and repeated and re-dressed for itself, from the innocent mascot, the luck-bringing trinket, to the rediscovery of the power latent in other people’s idols, influence all classes behind the mask of scepticism.¹⁷⁰

The Crystal Cabinet: My childhood at Salterns (1937)¹⁷¹

This is Mary Butts’ autobiography and the last of her works to be completed, though she never saw its publication. It was written after reflection on all the events and impressions gathered throughout her life, and those she chose to record are therefore those she regarded as the most significant. It is a curious work, eschewing a straightforward account of her early life for a semi-mystical meditation on the solitary child’s perception of the world, interspersed with songs and poems of

¹⁶⁷ According to Oceanic belief systems, Mana meant the positive aspects of the supernatural and could be harnessed to perform certain acts. Tabu referred to the negative aspects.

¹⁶⁸ *Ashe of Rings* p307

¹⁶⁹ *Ashe of Rings* p 310

¹⁷⁰ *Ashe of Rings* p327

¹⁷¹ Mary Butts, *The Crystal Cabinet: My childhood at Salterns* (Carcenet 1988)

particular significance.¹⁷² There is a pervasive acknowledgement of the essential magic to be found in nature, a simpler and purer form of magic which contrasts with ritual and more “urban” form of magic which is described, particularly in her short stories. This of course, reflects the path that her life and spiritual development had taken after her experiences with Crowley.

The essential characteristics which permeate the houses in both of her novels *Ashe of Rings* and *Armed with Madness* are manifested here in the form of Salterns, the Butts family home, which shares those important attributes of enclosure within the landscape and isolation from the outside world. Woods, are as always, of great significance, “ ... towards the house, [was] a mysterious belt of wood. Several woods, meeting on rising ground, ending in a dark half-moon to enclose the garden and the house.”¹⁷³ And again, the effect of this landscape is described, “Quiet in the woods is a very real magic, a tangible daimon to a child ...”¹⁷⁴ This daimon reappears in one of the most powerful passages in the book; a chant, a ritual, a spell if you will, devised by Mary to help her to deal with, and reassure herself, following the defining event of her youth – the death of her father.

Quiet in the woods, quieter than in the house at night. Where every night I thought I heard my father’s quick old step coming up the stairs and across the board that creaked to his room....

Quiet in the woods, but just behind you a tall daimon standing beside a tree...

Quiet in the woods, and I thought of my father’s wisdom as buried in a box, under a tree. Like in the old song – a gold box with a silver pin. Some day I should be grown up and I should dig up the box and turn the pin.....

The box of your father’s secret knowledge, which you have inherited. ¹⁷⁵

It is at Salterns that the child Mary is first given a glimpse into that other dimension hidden just the other side of reality:

¹⁷² Her brother Anthony was much younger than Mary and most of her childhood was spent as an only child.

¹⁷³ *The Crystal Cabinet* p 15

¹⁷⁴ *Crystal Cabinet* p 61

¹⁷⁵ *Crystal Cabinet* p 105

There was a little bush, doing a dance by itself, like a live child. Not the careful dances you had to learn, but skip and bounce and do what you like. Then I saw at the foot of that bush, a little man digging ... About two feet high, exceedingly thin, dressed in green with a rusty red cap, digging like mad at the roots. "Oh", I said, "so you *can* see them." ... The wind was different, and a goddess called Artemis who shot with the new moon.¹⁷⁶

She is learning the secret knowledge behind the natural world and the power held within natural objects, which can, if one knows the secret, be manifested and utilised. As the quote shows, even as a young child, she was fully aware of the world of classical mythology as well as the folk magic inherent in the country side. She attaches an intense magical significance to the stump of an oak tree, which is "... a mystery to be guarded." ¹⁷⁷ "For months I would not touch it. Then suddenly it would become vital again ... it was the thing on which I worked out my "imagination". ¹⁷⁸ These "imagination" would help her to endure the loss of her father, her beloved home and her banishment to school many miles away from her home in Dorset.

Her life was becoming defined by a sense of the "other", the au-dela, the strange, what she refers to as "an immediate earthly "unearthly", and the "delicate thrilling awareness out in the woods."¹⁷⁹

In Chapter 1, the experience that Mary Butts had at Badbury Rings, her initiation, was referred to. This was of critical significance throughout her life, and marked her entry into the mystical world and her discovery of the role of correspondences and deep symbolism in this world. It enabled her to begin making sense of the patterns that, in turn, made sense of random events; to see the inner meanings that touched on the 4th dimension. "Its meanings made sensible principally it seemed by repetitions of light, movement and sound in the tops of the grove. Light and flight, in relation to the earth moving and to the triple ring. " ¹⁸⁰

The experience she had at Badbury is described again at the end of *The Crystal Cabinet*, it is the climatic event to which all others led. Many years later, she tells us,

¹⁷⁶ *Crystal Cabinet* p 11

¹⁷⁷ *Crystal Cabinet* p 80

¹⁷⁸ *Crystal Cabinet* p 81

¹⁷⁹ *Crystal Cabinet* P 133

¹⁸⁰ *Crystal Cabinet* p266

she still remembered it clearly. In the final lines of the book, she describes how in Paris, after the war, she meets by chance a young man who was also there that day. The power of her memories enable her to attain the sort of visionary state that Crowley was unable to, on a car journey many years later:

The boy I had sat next to at lunch was driving the car. He vanished and a turn in the dream brought me face to face with the Rings.

Only, and these words are the nearest equivalent, in their actual shape, the nearest equivalent my very partly enlightened mind could conceive saw more than I could tell, infinitely more than I could carry. Yet enough when I woke and, like one struggling back from one life into another, flung open the windows, and through a swarm of winged creatures thrust out my head to the night air and the stars, to know that I had seen enough, if I could use it, to carry me to this journey's end.

And over. To where, as it is said, I should know as I was known.¹⁸¹

In Paris, after the War, she reflects on her experiences and this moment of mystical clarity. She understands that her "initiation" at the Rings was an event that set the course of her life, leading her to her profound fascination with magic and inspiring her astral journeys and spiritual insights. Ten years later, she meets the young man again, this time in Paris:

More than ten years. We danced together and he said, "What are two little Dorsetshire rabbits doing in the Rue de l'Harpe?" And I answered without thinking, yet as though it was waiting to be said, "It's because of Badbury Rings..."¹⁸²

The purpose of her writing was in various guises, her attempt to describe and understand her experience, at Badbury Rings. This was excellently summed up by the late Mark Valentine in an essay on Butts in his periodical *The Cauldron*. He proposes that her work is her attempt to convey, "The plenitude of the other realm she sometimes glimpsed through a sequence of strange connexions where apparently unrelated things seemed to mesh, to belong together. These would be

¹⁸¹Crystal Cabinet P 267

¹⁸² Crystal Cabinet p 268

strongly felt, but impossible to describe, like trying to create a constellation out of vastly separated stars.”¹⁸³

This chapter has looked critically at the published writing of Mary Butts (or writings that she intended to be published), and has shown how extensively ritual and magic influences and experiences are to be found. Butts used her life and her passions as both background and subject matter, and her preoccupation with these themes sometimes created difficulties of interpretation for her critics and readers. She herself acknowledged the difficulty of describing the indescribable, but she continued to try to communicate her world view to those who might join her in her quest.

¹⁸³ Mark Valentine, *The Mystical Fiction of Mary Butts* in *The Cauldron* August 2012

Conclusion

*Life flies past & I run with it.*¹⁸⁴

*Think of a corridor, a passage white-wood panelled with a green carpet strip as at Salterns. My passage in life is down one of these & I have passed many windows, some with pleasant views out on to several different lands; courts squaring a well or a fountain or a heap of tin cans.*¹⁸⁵

*It's a peculiar place. You get out of it what you put in.*¹⁸⁶

The quotes shown above, ranging in date from 1919 to 1929, have been selected to (albeit somewhat simplistically) summarise the complexity, uniqueness and difficulties of the life and works of Mary Butts. That is of course, the over-arching purpose of this thesis: to show how Mary Butts' deeply personal and idiosyncratic interest in the occult permeated her public and private writings. She was writing in that transitional period between the so-called occult revival of the nineteenth century, in which important figures such as Eliphas Levi began to systematically describe, and indeed practice, esoteric magic derived from ancient texts, and the post-war development of modern pagan witchcraft, for example, through the work of Gerald Gardner. What we see therefore in Butts, is an individual, passionately interested in these subjects, but having to construct her own methodology, taking elements from wherever she could find them.

In her first published work *Ashe of Rings*, Butts, speaking through her characters, attempts to describe her sense of the universe:

By the living soul in us all, I don't know. I feel power, movement, a pattern. It comes and goes – my being able to think about it, I mean. No one can think about such things all the time. It is magic, whatever magic is; and magic is not a metier.¹⁸⁷

The search for connections and patterns that exist within events, random objects, dreams and visions, was a preoccupation of Butts. It was for her, a much more

¹⁸⁴ Diary entry 3.6.19

¹⁸⁵ Diary entry 6.12.29

¹⁸⁶ *Ashe of Rings* p 86

¹⁸⁷ *Ashe of Rings* p 169

personal process than that represented by the formal tables of correspondences of the previous century, and in the poems of Baudelaire. Ritual purpose found in everyday objects - sticks in the street, feathers, the repositories for communion wafer - this was the stuff of ritual for Mary, a theme she returned to often in her diary and stories. She had an extraordinary ability to extract or apply, patterns and significance to or from, the most apparently mundane of objects.

A further important recurring theme in her work, was the power of place. This took two forms, firstly the power associated with a particular landscape, for example, her mythologising of the countryside surrounding Salterns, and the Cornwall of her later years. This is seen particularly in her first two novels and her autobiography. This was a magic derived from the elements, the moors, the trees, the wind and it had the power to lead to intensely emotional and spiritual experiences, “ the music (after Salterns) seemed to have been in my ears ever since I was born ...”¹⁸⁸

The other aspect of this power in place is illustrated by her writing about the urban landscape, particularly that of Paris. Her diary and stories, in particular “Mappa Mundi”, are full of references to the many layers of the city, and the profound sense of the past that permeates it, for example, “Explored the part of Paris that lies behind the Quai St Michel, behind Charcornac’s shop & Notre Dame. There is a magical relation between that shop and the Church.”¹⁸⁹ The multiple layers of the occult past were, for Butts, accessible to those who wished to experience them; though caution was always necessary.

In the process of following her particular path, Butts was drawn from time to time to charismatic and influential individuals (Crowley, Heseltine), ultimately, however, no-one was able to guide her better than she felt able to guide herself. From initial intrigue and enthusiasm, Butts was able to move to a far more objective and critical response. She clearly suffered from her association with Crowley (as did others), but after a period of confusion and near destitution, she was able to shrug off his influence and continue to develop her own spirituality in her own way.

¹⁸⁸ Diary entry 16.1.37

¹⁸⁹ Diary entry 13.4.21 Paul Charcornac was a contemporary author and publisher of occult and astrological works.

Mary Butts was a magpie. She collected information from disparate sources, literary or human, whatever was available to her at the time, took what she wanted or found useful, and either incorporated it into her world view or moved on having discarded it. Despite the way in which magic and spirituality permeated her whole life, and was of immense importance to her, she was interested in sharing her discoveries, only in the most elliptical fashion, through her fiction. She had never intended her diaries for publication, they were ,” [t]he day’s tiny discipline & part salve to my conscience.”¹⁹⁰ Writing in her diary was the way in which she tried to make sense to herself, of the wonder and mystery she found in the universe. In her fiction she alluded to this mystery and challenged the reader to follow the clues if they chose, in order to make their own spiritual discoveries.

She had, it must be said, a tendency to be extremely self-absorbed. Her life revolved around her own personal development and she was surprisingly silent on the extraordinary events she lived through – the Great War, the economic crash of the Twenties. These were not the subjects that interested her. Her magical “manifesto” of April 1919 consists of 7 statements, all beginning “I”. ¹⁹¹ Her diaries detail her own thoughts and responses to situations, and how other people’s actions impact on her.

Her path took her from Dorset, to London, to Paris, to Cefalu, to Paris and London again, and ultimately to Cornwall where she at last seems to have achieved a sort of peace, despite being affected with a number of physical ailments, culminating in her tragically premature death. To the end of her life, her visions sustained her. Only weeks before she died, in January 1937, she wrote about these visions of the other world beyond this one, and about how her perception had become more acute with experience. I have quoted from this passage before, but it seems to me to sum up the extraordinary and visionary nature of this remarkable woman:

The difficulty that has always haunted me & I have never faced, of writing down these conceptions that constantly occur, yet always on the borderlands of the mind; which though continual, escape un-pinned down, & so their significance never revealed. When I was younger, it seemed an achievement to know they were there. Lately I have come as it were to clasp them closer, &

¹⁹⁰ Diary entry 23.12.29

¹⁹¹ Diary entry 19.4.19

more than once decide that they are worth recording. Yet at the moment there is not one whose nature I can indicate. They escape as dreams escape.....
next time, catch one of them I will! ¹⁹²

Her extraordinary and mysterious visions, her often difficult and mysterious writing, her constant sense of the past and its influence on the present, the power of the will to focus the mind, her myths and rituals, and the meticulous way in which she recorded all of this, make Mary Butts deserving of attention. She may be a footnote in the history of magic and spirituality, but she was a pioneer , and in the period before the rise of modern paganism, she made her own magic.

¹⁹² Diary entry 26.1.37

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